

付喪堂3

不思議取り扱いします

御堂 彰彦
イラスト◆タケシマサトシ

付喪堂

骨董店

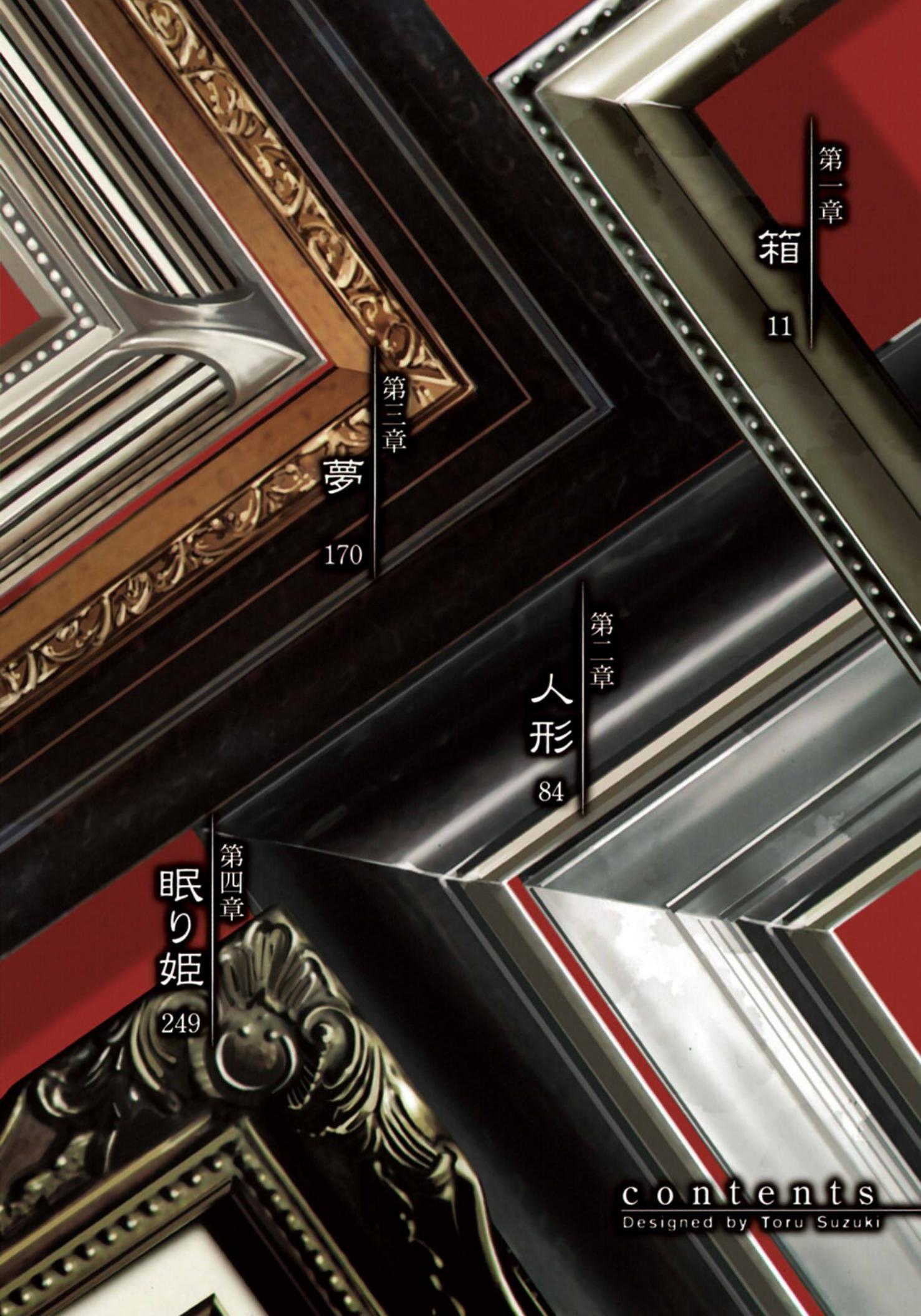
3

不思議取り扱いします

御堂彰彦
イラスト・タケシマサトシ

付喪堂骨董店

高い中



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Designed by Toru Suzuki





Prologue

In our world there are objects called 'Relics'.

Not antiques or objects of classical art, no: they can be tools with special powers created by mighty ancients or magicians, or objects that have absorbed their owners' grudges or natural spiritual powers after long exposure.

For instance: a stone that brings good luck, a doll whose hair grows night after night, a mirror that shows you how you'll look in the future, a sword that brings ruin to anyone who draws it.

Everybody has most likely heard of such things, as they appear in countless fairy tales and rumors.

Most people consider *Relics* mere fantasies because they have never come across any. Even if a Relic were right before their eyes, they'd fail to notice it. If a mysterious event were to occur, they'd dismiss it as a coincidence.

Some remain unconcerned, while others are certain that such things do not exist.

Regrettably, Relics are real, and more common than people think.

Whether they bring about good or ill fortune depends on the ones who choose to use them.

Chest

Every one of us has a chest of varying shape, color and size.

Inside this chest, we might keep invaluable memories.

We might keep a past that we are ashamed of.

We might keep a sin that cannot be forgiven.

Every one of us has a chest.

A secret chest in which we hide things that no one must see, that no one must take from us.



I was looking down at a chest.

I reached out for it and opened the chest. Its hinges groaned as the lid tilted backward.

I then carefully put *her* inside. She awoke from her slumber and faintly opened her eyes.

She gazed up at me with drowsy but focused eyes that seemed to represent how weak she was, saddening me.

Struggling against the urge to say something, I kept my mouth shut.

I could not let her out just yet, no matter what she said. Although she couldn't even speak the words to ask for it.

Suddenly, something fell on her nose with a soft plop.

It was not a tear drop, but a rain drop from the rain that had been forecast to arrive in the afternoon.

Unable to comprehend what had wetted her nose, she perplexedly squinted forward, and eventually rubbed her nose against the inner wall of the chest to wipe the drop off.

The rain grew stronger by the second and was at its peak in no time. I opened the umbrella that I had brought with me and held it over her.

Once more she was perplexed because the rain drops had suddenly disappeared, and looked around.

It didn't take long, however, until she got cold and shook herself.

For an instant, I felt the strong desire to enfold her in my arms, but I barely managed to hold myself back.

Not yet. I can't cuddle you just yet.

Forgive me for putting you into such a place. I really do feel sorry. But I mustn't hand you over to anyone. I don't want to.

So be a good girl and hide in here, yes?

As if to escape from the innocent looks she was giving me, I closed the chest.

She was going to be in a deep slumber in the dark, ignorant to what was going on.

One day I will let you out. I promise.

So please bear with me for now!



I, Tokiya Kurusu, was on my way to my part-time job.

Your typical part-time job for a 2nd year high-school student would be at a fast food chain or a gas station, but I was a little special in this regard.

After turning away from the main street and passing a couple of side streets, I arrived at a small old shop whose signboard read "Tsukumodo Antique Shop." It was the place where I worked.

When I opened the door, I was greeted by the agreeable jingling of bells and the sight of our products—things like ceramic ware, dolls, and an old longcase clock.

"You're late, Tokiya," the owner of this shop, Towako Settsu, said as I came in.

A pair of well-formed eyebrows adorned her face, a strong will shone in her eyes, and smooth black hair of a brilliant luster reached down to her waist. Her slender build did not only match up with that of a model, but was a sight for sore eyes when combined with her self-confident demeanor. She would probably beat me up if I said that this was quite stunning for a woman near her thirties, but it was a truth nonetheless.

"She has just returned," a workmate of mine, Saki Maino, explained as she appeared from the living room.

In contrast to her pale hair, which reached down to the middle of her back and shone silver when lit, and her soft white skin, she was clad entirely in black; she wore a black shirt with frills, a black skirt and black boots. I had never seen her wear anything that wasn't black of her own accord. It was one of her quirks.

"You've been away for quite a while this time, haven't you?" I said.

"Yeah, but I also got a whole lot of spoils!"

Towako-san had just returned from her purchases. She would sometimes leave the shop to us and go buy new products, although I didn't know where she took up their trails. On a closer look, she had a hard time controlling her smile—it seemed like she had really made a good buy. She was itching to introduce them to us.

"So, what did you buy?"

As though she had been waiting for me to ask, she quickly picked one of the miscellaneous items behind her and placed it before Saki and me.

It looked like a common big wooden chest whose lid was attached to it with hinges.

"Get a load of this, guys: everything that's inside this storage box will keep fresh forever!"

Though most people might wonder what she is talking about when she says "a storage box that keeps its contents fresh", she was not joking or messing with us.

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As a matter of fact, I too had just recently been involved with a mirror, which

silenced its reflections, a mask, which copied the appearance and skills and personality of its owner, a pair of glasses, which gave insight into whatever someone else's eyes had seen, and a camera, which printed out a photo of a certain point in the future.

The purchases Towako-san made were all Relics.

"Something from several years ago is stored inside. I bought that as well," she said as she laid her hands on the chest. She gave us short glances and added, "Ready guys? Perk up your eyes and take a good look."

She pushed the lid open. Suppressing the urge to correct her strange expression, Saki and I stood beside her and peeked into the chest, and—



"WHOA!"

We shrunk back.

"This stinks! This stinks *terribly!* There's something rotten in there, I tell you!"

The moment we opened the chest, a disgusting stench of rot that had been ripening for years was released into the shop.

"Saki! The window! Open the window! Huh? Hey, don't die on me! Get a grip!" I yelled just to notice that Saki had already been put out of action and was lying on the floor.

"My eyes...! My eyes!" Towako-san lamented as she writhed with soring eyes.

"Excuse m—EEEK!"

An unlucky customer entered the shop just to make a U-turn and run off with a piercing scream. He had been our first customer in a week, but now wasn't the time to be concerned with that.

"Close the lid!"

"Tokiya, we believe in you!" Towako-san shouted back and fled into the living area together with Saki, coldly leaving me behind.

With unequalled courage, I carefully drew nearer to the chest and kicked it out of the shop. As the chest rolled over the ground, something unidentifiable that would be censored with mosaics on TV jumped out of it and fell down a drain.

It looked to me like it was moving of its own, but I was sure that I had just been seeing things.

After about half an hour during which we left the windows and the door wide open and sprayed a ton of air freshener on the forbidden chest and the room, the shop finally returned to normal.

"Shit! It's a fake! That guy totally tricked me!" Towako-san yelled as she held her head and kicked the chest that had turned out to be fake. "Tokiya, put it up for sale."

In the end, we threw—no, we "put up"—the now smell-less chest in a corner of the shop, adding yet another item that no one would dream of buying to our product range.

I think it's clear to the reader now: as the shop name suggests, all products lined up in the Tsukumodo Antique Shop (FAKE) were fake Relics that Towako-san had been deceived with.

However, the chest was not all she had purchased this time around. Apart from it, there was also a scrubbing brush that could clean off any kind of dirt (was she home shopping?), a stomach clock that made you hungry at the time you set it to (quite literally), a mirror that made you look slimmer (you can get those everywhere), and so on and so forth. They all turned out to be fake, however, and ended up in our shop shelves.

"Rrrghh..." Towako-san grinded her teeth with annoyance and presented her last purchase to me. "It's a dog collar that makes the wearer listen to everything you say!"

"Cool."

"Can't you put some more spirit into your reactions!?"

"Wooow."

"Think you can make fun of me, eh?!" she yelled as she grabbed my neck, but to be honest, I had grown tired of this procedure.

It gets old. It was funny the first 3 times. Okay, the truth is that I only found it funny the first time, though.

"Okay, sure thing, I'll have you wear this!"

With these words Towako-san tried to put the collar around my neck, but

sadly it was too short. Obviously, the collar was designed for animals like cats or dogs.

"Shoot...!"

While Towako-san was sulking to herself, Saki showed up from the living room: "Are you still at it?"

She had been taking a shower because she complained that the smell had jumped over. Her still wet hair was wrapped up in a bath towel and her clothes had changed. They were also black, though.

The Tsukumodo Antique Shop was also Towako-san's residence. Behind the shop itself in the first floor, there was the living room, the kitchen, a restroom and a bathroom, and in the second floor they had their rooms. I myself had rented an apartment elsewhere, but Saki was staying here.

"Call me when you are done," Saki said.

As she turned around to the living room, I responded, "Got it. This is just the last one, tho—"

Suddenly, I noticed that Towako-san had disappeared. I searched the room for her with my eyes and found her sneaking up to Saki from behind. On her face she wore a mischievous smile and in her hands she carried the dog collar.

"Hm?"

Saki noticed something behind her and turned around, but it was already too late: Towako-san slid the collar around Saki's neck. While it had been too short for my neck, it fit hers perfectly.

"Saki-chan, get us some tea."

"...Okay," she nodded in response to Towako-san's sudden request and went back into the living room, heading toward the kitchen.

"Ta-dah! What do you say now, Tokiya?" Towako-san boasted as she pointed at Saki's back.

"Give me a break... you're always having her make tea for you, remember?"

"You're quite the sceptic today, eh?"

"No, I think I made a perfectly natural objection..."

"Fine then, it's your turn to come up with an order. If she obeys, I'll have you acknowledge its genuineness!" said Towako-san.

Before long, Saki returned carrying a cup of black tea.

Towako-san shook her chin in Saki's direction, signaling me to go. It didn't look like I could talk my way out of this anymore. In order to get her to admit that this was not a real Relic, I needed to come up with a command that Saki would definitely not listen to.

"Err... Hey, Saki, smile."

"What is it, out of the blue?"

"Never mind, just smile."

"...I am," an expressionless Saki said.

That ain't no smile!

"..."

"..."

There was an awkward silence between us. Saki had claimed to be smiling, but her face was as straight as always.

Saki was not one to show her feelings and was generally pretty much expressionless. Seeing how she could not even pull a friendly smile in front of our customers, she was clearly not cut out for customer service, even though she was dead-sure of the opposite.

Anyhow, it was not possible to tell whether or not she had followed my order at this rate.

"There are more obvious things you could go with, no? Just tell her to undress and the matter's closed!" Towako-san urged me.

Whoa, give me a break... tell her to undress? Well, it's a fake anyway, so she wouldn't actually do it.

"Okay, fine with me. Saki, take off your clothes."

Saki's eyes widened for a moment and her body tensed up, but an instant later she dropped her head and clasped her hands tightly in front of her chest.

Huh? This is taking a different course than I anticipated...?

Saki silently walked up to me and sent me a bashful upward glance from below.

Err, what? Is she really going to...?

It was then that she bounced her hands off her chest and smacked me straight in the face.

"Ugh!"

"You sure deserved that," Towako-san said with blank astonishment, casting aside all responsibility.

"It's you who told me to say so!"

"I was talking about the towel on her head."

"You didn't even imply that!" *Gosh!* I cursed to myself as I rubbed my aching nose. "But now we know that this collar's just a fake."

"..."

"..."

"Oh my god, they tricked me...!"

"You can't be that slow!"

After her latest purchase trip had turned out fruitless entirely, Towako-san

was left in a shocked state and retreated into her room.

I shrugged my shoulders and heaved a sigh of relief—and was interrupted.

"Would you let me in on what you two were doing?" asked Saki with a horribly monotonous voice.

"Ah, look, Towako-san said that the collar you're wearing would make you listen to everything we say, so we tried to check if it's the real deal."

"I see. Is that why you made such a queer order?"

"Well, yeah. But I knew it was a fake."

"What if it hadn't been?" she asked in response.

"Hm?"

"What would have happened if it had been a real Relic?"

"Duh, I guess you would have listened to my order and taken off your clothes, no?"

"Uh-huh," Saki uttered with a chilling voice.

For some reason, I had lately become able to recognize a certain type of emotion despite her expressionless face.

"Umm..." I groaned as I scratched my head. "Are you mad?"

Saki remained silent and smacked me in the face once more.

Saki and I were walking side by side. Perhaps to pay me back, she had instructed me to help her do the shopping, which was one of her tasks as the one who did all the housework.

That being said, it was all the same to me if I was waiting the shop or carrying around a couple of bags for her. In fact, forcing the work at the shop onto Towako-san and going shopping myself made for a real good change of

pace.

There was naturally *no* animated conversation going on between Saki and me as we walked, but that wasn't news. Besides, taking an easy, silent stroll like this seemed to have repaired her mood.

Suddenly, we spotted a little girl who had shouldered a schoolbag squatting in the middle of the way. Noticing that someone was approaching, the girl raised her head and looked at us.

"Saki-chan!" she cheered, waving her arms, as her eyes hit on Saki.

Surprised, I looked at Saki who was waving back at the girl with a face as straight as always.

According to the introduction Saki then gave me, this girl, who had braided two adorable buns into her hair with a pair of flower hair clips, was called Asami Yanagi. They had become friends in the course of feeding a stray cat together. The cat was later adopted by Asami-chan, so lately they only saw each other when they happened to run into each other.

"Is Mii doing well?" Saki asked. Asami-chan's face clouded over, however, when she heard the name of the cat mentioned earlier. "Is something wrong?"

"Mii has gone somewhere..." explained Asami-chan.

"Do you know where she is?"

"Dunno... she went away three days ago and hasn't come back."

Cats are inherently unfettered animals and frequently return only when they feel like it. I did, however, understand that she was concerned as the pet owner.

"But Saki-chan, I think she's at the cat mansion!"

"The cat mansion?"

"Mm. There's this mansion nearby where there are lots of cats! They all say

that that's where the cats go when they are missing."

"Did you go there and look for her?" asked Saki.

"Mmm, I'm scared of the granny who lives there..." Asami-chan muttered with a thin voice, looking down at the ground. I gathered that she was currently at a loss because she worried about her cat but lacked the courage to confront the scary old woman.

To cheer her up, Saki placed her hands on Asami-chan's shoulders and proposed, "Let's go there together, shall we?"

"Would you really do that for me?" the girl asked as her gloomy face disappeared behind a radiant smile.

"Yes, I'll help you search," assured Saki.

"Thanks so much!"

Saki took her hand and walked in the direction she was pointing.



"Okay, I'm back at the shop if you need me."

Finally recalling that I was still here as well, Saki stopped and came all the way back to me.

"What are you talking about? You're coming with us, too, Tokiya."

"Huh?"

She must be kidding! As if I could be bothered to run after a cat. My working time is almost over, too.

"Yes? Do you want to defy me?"

"...No, of course not," I pressed out and found myself obeying her in spite of my disagreeing own will.

I couldn't defy Saki's orders. Maybe the collar was a real Relic, albeit with a slightly different power than expected... *oh well, that's unlikely.*

After giving Towako-san a call and telling her that we would be late, we set out to search for that cat. "Let's go," Asami-chan said as she took my hand and started to walk.

With the little girl between us, Saki and I headed toward the cat mansion.

The nameplate of the place that Asami-chan called "cat mansion" also read "mansion". Needless to say, the building, which was surrounded by thick walls, lived up to that name: although appearing somewhat old and brittle, it was no doubt a full-fledged mansion with no less than 20 rooms.

Above all, however, the name "cat mansion" was not without reason: there were cats in the front yard, on the roof, and so forth—from the typical suspects like the white, black and tricolor ones to more special types that you would usually only encounter in a pet shop. I counted more than 20 cats at a glance.

It made sense that the people living here expected cats to be here when they disappeared.

"Color me surprised; that's an American Shorthair over there. And there's even a Chinchilla," Saki remarked.

"You're quite the specialist, huh?" I hadn't expected her to be so knowledgeable about this kind of thing.

"I've read a book on cats the other day. I think the title was 'The Complete Guide to the Way of Cats.'"

"Planning to adopt a cat?"

Saki frowned at me and replied, "What are you talking about, Tokiya? It's all to improve the customer experience."

Saki had the habit of reading through all kinds of books to master the art of customer service, which she believed to be her true vocation.

However, *she* was the one who was out of it.

"If I understand the willful nature of cats, I will also understand the willfulness of our customers, don't you agree?"

"No, not at all. That's definitely not gonna work out."

Asami-chan was inclining her head while we were talking, unable to follow the conversation. Well, fair enough: even I had no idea what we were talking about even though I was used to this.

Well, we shouldn't be standing around at the entrance anyway.

Since we couldn't just walk in, I had Saki push the bell for starters.

Moments later, someone yelled at us, "Who is it?" and appeared on the other side of the iron fence. It was an aged, stooping woman who had white hair and a small stature. The deep wrinkles in her face gave her a rigorous impression; Asami-chan hid behind Saki's back.

"I asked you who you are!" she yelled not at Saki, who had rung the bell, but at me, looking me in the eyes.

"Err, it seems like the cat of this girl here has lost its way into your property. Would you be so kind as to let us look for it?"

The old woman looked at each of us and then screw up her nose, "These cats all belong to me. Don't bother me and go home."

She was a textbook example of an uncompromising person. I gathered that the old woman's chilly attitude would intimidate a child like Asami-chan. Having to deal with a much more emotionless attitude on a daily basis, however, that unfriendly response was no skin off my nose.

"But someone actually saw the cat enter here! Can't you make an exception for us?"

"I think I told you to go."

"We're not going to bother you, madam. We'll be gone before you know it."

"You're a pushy lad, eh? You are already bothering me, if you haven't noticed!" she said and turned around to bring our discussion to a close.

Before we knew it, a bunch of cats had assembled around the old woman, rubbing their cheeks at her legs.

"Is it time for a meal?" Saki asked. The old woman did answer with a brief nod, "Yes."

Saki turned around to the young girl and said, "Asami-chan, did you hear that? They're about to eat, so let's come back later."

Okay...they must be hungry after all..." Asami-chan agreed because she noticed that the cats were constantly Miiing by the old woman's feet.

"We'll come again at a better time. I would appreciate it if you would let us search for our cat at that time," Saki explained in a polite tone.

The old woman sneered annoyedly, "...If you help me feed them, I'll let you in for a moment so that you can search for that cat."

She walked up to the fence, unlocked the door and went back, followed by her cats.

"Hurry up and come in. I don't need slackers," she shouted backward without looking because we were still frozen on the spot, confused by the turn of events. Maybe she was not as bad a person as her attitude suggested.

We followed the cats that were walking after the old woman into the big front yard. Slowly but surely, more cats started to gather from all sides, allured by the upcoming meal, and joined the big march of dozens of cats. Asami-chan, too, joined the march and followed them with eyes twinkling with excitement.

"Cheerful girl, eh?" I remarked to Saki, who was walking besides me, but I didn't get a response. Slightly suspicious of her silence, I turned my head to her and found her utterly bewitched by the sight of the cat march. She had obviously not even noticed my speaking.

Before long, the old woman returned carrying a huge sack of cat food that she had fetched at the entrance. Still afraid, however, Asami-chan hid behind Saki's back.

The old woman noticed her timid behavior but didn't pay any attention to it and instead thrust her hand into the sack and scattered a handful of cat food, starting to feed the cats.

With loud Miiing, the cats gathered around the food and produced a cracking sound with their gnawing.

"Here," the woman said as she held out the sack to us. Apparently, we were supposed to work.

I moved my hand to accept the bag, but Saki was stepped forward and took it in my stead. Asami-chan's presence seemed to inspirit her. That being said, I

was a bit afraid that the sack was too heavy for her because it looked quite massive.

"I'll leave the cats outside to you. Make sure that they all get their food!" With these words, the old woman disappeared into the house.

Simultaneously, Asami-chan stepped out of Saki's shadow.

"Are you still afraid?" I asked and got an awkward smile for an answer.

"Well, she may not be sociable, but I don't think she's a bad person."

It was perfectly possible that she had gone back in so as to not scare Asami-chan.

"Mm..." the girl nodded.

"But Saki isn't any more sociable, is she?"

"Huh? That's not true at all! Saki-chan isn't scary! She's really nice and smiles a lot!"

"She does what?" I asked with astonishment. "She doesn't smile, does she?"

"But she does! Although it's not so easy to tell. You're doing a bad job if you can't tell as much, Onii-chan! You're her boyfriend, so get your act together!"

While I was a bit bewildered by her sudden acting up, I answered in a clear way: "I'm not her boyfriend."

"Adults are such poor liars!" she declared as if she knew it all and walked off to Saki who was about to distribute the cat food.

Slightly unsteady on her feet because of the sack's weight, Saki started to scatter the food just like the old woman had demonstrated. The cats, in response, jumped at their meal and gnawed away at it.

"Saki-chan, let me scatter some, too!" Asami-chan said as she held out both her hands to Saki to receive the sack.

After pondering for a moment, Saki eventually handed the food over to her.

However, the sack was too heavy for a little girl like Asami-chan; unable to sustain its weight, she dropped the sack and the contents got scattered about. Saki made an impulsive attempt to scoop the food back into the sack, but this proved to be a mistake: cats charged at the spilled food from all sides, some of them even taking leaps, and Saki ended up tumbling over because of the rush. The cats didn't seem to care, though, and before long she drowned entirely in the torrent of cats.

"I hope Saki-chan's fine..."

"Maybe she's suffocating."

After a while during which we watched the cat's feast from afar, they wandered off and a slobbery Saki with rumpled hair and clothes became visible underneath the mountain of cats.

When we rushed to her, she sat up and stared into the air.

"Hello? Are you okay?" I asked as I waved my hand in front of her face but she showed no reaction whatsoever. However, she didn't seem to be in a shock.

As a test, I grabbed white kitten by its neck and held it aloft before Saki. As if in a trance, she slowly raised her hands

I moved the kitten to the right and her hands wiggled to the right.

I moved the kitten to the left and her hands wiggled to the left.

When I finally released the cat into her arms, she squeezed it tenderly, her cheeks flushed and her eyes damped.

"You *love* cats, don't you?"

As if to confirm my discovery, Saki unconsciously let out a blissful sigh,
"Hew..."

Hm... it's news to me that she liked cats that much.

Apparently, she had first become interested in them when reading that self-improvement book and grew fond of them in the course of feeding that stray cat Mii. Perhaps, she wanted to actually adopt one, although I had not picked up any signs that suggested so in her behavior.

Asami-chan would give me another scolding if she found out...

After we had finished feeding the cats, we got permission from the old woman to search all her mansion except for her own room.

"Go home when you found your cat!" she grunted and retreated into her room. She had no plans to monitor us, it seemed, let alone help us.

"Okay, where do we start? Oh, what does that cat look like, anyway?"

"She has white fur, and her right ear is black. She'll respond if you call her Mii, so you won't miss her."

I wouldn't be too sure about that I disagreed in my mind, but it seemed like she firmly believed that the cat would show up if we called her. Asami-chan then tried to estimate the cat's size with her hands, but the size was pretty much equivalent with any other cat's.

"Does she wear a cat collar or something of the sort?"

"Yes. A collar that reads 'Mii.'"

She had white fur, a black right ear, and wore a collar—those were the characteristics of the cat in question. Our task seemed to be to find every white cat with a black ear and check their collar.

The cats didn't only linger about outside in the yard, but also inside the mansion. Asami-chan had not spotted Mii when she fed the cats in the yard; we should have watched the old woman when she fed the other cats, but it was too late for that now.

"Let's focus on the mansion for the time being."

Saki and Asami-chan took on the first floor, while I was in charge of searching upstairs. A cat that had made itself at home on the handrail of the stairs looked my way and dashed off. It was just a brown one, though.

Upon arriving at the second floor, I walked along the corridor when suddenly a round chubby cat with fluffy white fur pushed open a door and crossed my way. The cat was way bigger than the one Asami-chan had described. Bad luck.

However, I then noticed that none of the doors were actually closed, most likely to enable the cats to enter and leave the rooms freely.

In order to start somewhere, I picked the nearest door and tried entering the room. Inside was not a futon but a real bed mounted by a calico, which lazily yawned at me and went back to sleep. The cat seemed to have no fear at all of humans.

I then also took a look into the other rooms, but all of them were practically empty. If it weren't for the old woman, I might have deemed this place to be an empty mansion.

Come to think about it, is she the only one living here? This place seems a bit too spacious for a single person to inhabit. Does she have no family?

After I had finished my tour, I went back downstairs and ran into the old woman who was leaving her room.

"Didn't find her?"

After I'd replied with a nod, she sighed: "I thought so."

"Do you live alone here, if I may ask?"

"Yes, I'm alone now." For a moment there, I feared having asked a nasty question because of the 'now', but as though she had seen through me, she added: "I had a husband and a daughter whom I both survived. I'm certainly not lonely and seeking company of cats, though, mind you."

The difference in life experience between the two of us showed.

"Why is it then that you are keeping so many cats around here?"

"I'm not keeping them—they come here of their own. Although there are also people who abandon their cats here. Must be thinking I wouldn't be able to tell if there's one more or one less."

"Do you not return those to their owners?" I asked.

"You want me to return a cat to someone who just disposed of it? I'm not going to do that even if that former owner changed his mind and came here pleading me to give his cat back."

That explains why there are so many of them here, I said to myself.

As she finished speaking, a kitten walked up to her and rubbed itself against her legs.

"Got no slice of the cake, eh?" she said, fully understanding the kitten's intent, and put some cat food on the floor that she had taken out of her pocket. Apparently, the kitten had lost in the competition for food and had not eaten enough.

Suddenly, the old woman realized that I was watching and asked bashfully, "What's there to laugh about?"

"Oh, don't mind me."

Obviously, she was not being honest with me at all when she told me that she was not keeping the cats. The fact that she had told us that these cats all belonged to her must have slipped her mind as well.

"Hmph! Don't get the wrong idea, young man. It's not like I'm a hopeless cat lover who can't forsake a stray cat in need!"

Does that also qualify as a tsundere? I asked myself but then decided to change the subject in order not to cross her:

"You don't happen to know about an all-white cat with a black right ear?"

"Young man, you're mistaken if you think that I remember each and every cat around here."

She was lying. Just a few moments earlier she had gone on about how some cat owners abandoned their cats at her place thinking she wouldn't notice. I was quite sure that she remembered all cats that lived here.

"We're grateful for any hint."

"...I don't believe there was a cat like that. I think I'd remember such a special one."

In that case, maybe the cat wasn't here after all.

"At any rate, can I ask you to leave for the day? It's about time to go to sleep," she said. Looking at my watch, it was almost 6pm. "I don't know about the kids nowadays, but I'm quite sure a little one like this girl shouldn't be playing outside at this time. Are her parents informed? If not, then they'll be worried about her!"

While there was no curfew for Saki and me, she was absolutely right in that we were supposed to take Asami-chan home.

It was then that Saki and Asami-chan appeared.

"Did you find her?"

The two of them shook their head. Asami-chan looked rather disappointed. I had heard her calling Mii's name in the second floor as well earlier, but apparently her efforts were fruitless.

"Let's call it a day, shall we?" I proposed to Saki and pointed at the clock on the wall. She probably wanted to search some more, but reminded of the time she agreed with me.

"Let's call it a day, Asami-chan," I said.

"But..." the girl muttered reluctantly.

"We'll give you a hand tomorrow as well. Deal?"

Saki nodded affirmatively. We then agreed on a time when we would gather.

"A white cat with a black ear, right?" the old woman said. "I'll let you know if I find one. Now, quick, get home safe."

Asami-chan nodded obediently and left together with Saki to fetch her satchel.

"You're quite the do-gooder, eh?" the old woman said as she looked at me with a wry smile.

Well, I want to see this matter through now that I'm part of it. Besides, I can't just bail on one of the sparse friend of Saki's.

"But how come you're so cooperative?" I asked because I had definitely not expected that she would help us judging by her attitude when we met at the entrance.

"Hmph. Well... because of sympathy, I suppose? I had a similar experience in the past. Never ... never let go of what you treasure. Because there's no going back sometimes."

Did her parents abandon her pet when she was a child or something? Maybe this cat mansion is a reaction to that event.

Just when such thoughts crossed my mind, someone knocked on the door.

"Who is it at this unreasonable hour?" the woman growled.

We both headed to the entrance. When she opened the door, a young lady appeared on the other side. The expression on her face was serious but her features somehow resembled those of Asami-chan's.

"You..."

"Is Asami here? Someone has seen her entering."

She really turned out to be Asami-chan's mother. I gathered that she had come to fetch her daughter because of the time.

"Yes, she's here and preparing to leave. Wait a moment, I'll call her," the old woman said and went inside to call Asami-chan.

Having missed the opportunity, I was left alone with her mother who was anything but amused.

"Um, I'm a friend of Asami-chan's. We were looking for Mii."

"For Mii? Uh-huh. Thank you."

Even though she had given thanks to me, I didn't feel a grain of gratitude. An awkward silence was between us.

Suddenly, a trusting kitten turned up and walked up to her legs.

At first, I thought the cat might help us bridge the time, but Asami-chan's mother quickly moved somewhere else after giving the kitten a brief glance. Unimpressed by that, however, the cat approached her again. Eventually, the woman resorted to pushing the cat away with her legs. While she was careful not to hurt the kitten, it was clear at a glance that she didn't like cats.

"Do you dislike cats?"

That question escaped my lips and earned me a frosty look.

"Um, I was wondering because Asami-chan loves cats."

"Yes. Asami and my husband insist on keeping a cat, but I don't particularly like cats. They need a lot of looking after and they soil the carpet and the laundry..."

"Do you have an idea where Mii could be?"

"I wouldn't know. But cats are footloose animals."

To me she didn't seem disinterested about the cat's whereabouts but rather deliberately indifferent, perhaps even glad that the cat had gotten lost.

"Well, we will no longer keep that cat anyway, even if you find her."

"Hm?"

"Hasn't Asami said anything?" she asked. "We're moving into a newly constructed apartment block this week because the house we rented has gotten old. It's not that far, so Asami can still go to the same school as before, but pets are not allowed in our new apartment."

"I'm not going anywhere!" Asami-chan loudly denied as she appeared at the entrance. "I'm not going to that new house! I'm staying home with Mii!"

"Asami. Will you stop being a naughty child? We agreed that you can keep Mii only while we're living at our old home, do you remember?"

"No! I want to be with Mii!"

"But Mii has run off, child!" her mother argued.

"She's taking a stroll somewhere! Mii is going to come back to me!"

"...Anyway, it's late. We're going home."

"I don't wanna!"

"Fine! Have it your own way!"

It was then that the old woman stepped in and reproved the mother, "You shouldn't be saying such things."

However, she ignored the old woman and said, "Thank you for looking after Asami. But I would appreciate it if we could put an end to this farce."

She bowed lightly and walked off, followed by a weeping Asami-chan who begged her to wait. No child can endure being left behind by her mother, even when in an argument. Well aware of that herself, her mother stopped shortly after leaving the mansion and went home together with Asami-chan.

I sure didn't expect that, I thought. Asami-chan's family is moving in a few days, so she won't be able to keep Mii anymore.

Despite that, she had not given up hope and was looking for her cat, believing things would somehow work out. For her mother, though, the cat's sudden disappearance must have been a convenient coincident.

Maybe Mii ran away because she sensed that she would be abandoned soon?

"I want to be with Mii..." the old woman whispered, repeating what Asami-chan had said a few moments before.



It was seven in the evening—the time when *the chest* would appear.

Said chest, which had been in my property for quite a while, had the peculiar characteristic of perfectly preserving anything stored in it. There was a sequence of 14 rotating dials attached to it that allowed setting a date and a time; the chest would then disappear once and reappear before the owner at the set time.

Depending on the setting, the chest could disappear almost eternally—but eventually, it would reappear again. Just like a sin once committed, it was impossible to erase the chest altogether,

If there came a time when I could erase my sin—and this chest—then it was bound to be the time when I drew my last breath.

I was convinced that even if the chest had once belonged to someone else, they had certainly not used it the way I did: Not for the foolish act of locking up a living being.

However, I had no other choice but to keep hiding it. No one could see it, no one could get it; for the chest held proof of the sin I had committed.

I opened the lid of the chest, which had appeared before me, and sighed with relief upon confirming that nothing had changed.

While my daily rhythm had been somewhat disturbed by my unexpected visitors, this moment was a firmly established and unshakable ritual.

*But I didn't expect that girl to be the daughter of Yanagi-san. Good grief...
Things have gotten a bit complicated.*

It was then that the attester of my sin opened her eyes and looked up at me. With unknowing, innocent eyes, the little one gazed at me.

She faintly opened her mouth to let out a thin utter that faded meaninglessly into nothingness.

"Release me!" my mental ear heard. Of course, there could be no conversation between us.

Suddenly, someone knocked at the door. I ignored the knocking at first, but the visitor would not stop. Left with no other choice, I eventually left the room and went to open the door.

"Who is it?" I asked and was faced by Asami-chan. "What business do you have here at this late hour?"

Has she forgotten anything? I wondered, but it was most unlikely that her mother would send her here. She had obviously come here in secret.

"Did something happen?"

Asami-chan focused on me and demanded, "Give Mii back to me."

I had to immediately give up on my notion of lying to her when I looked into her eyes.

She had found out.

I thought I had hidden her quite well, though...

"...Fine! I'll let you see Mii," I said.

Asami-chan nodded and without any further ado entered.

It may have been for the better if you had remained ignorant, girl...

I closed the door.



I was on my way home from the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. I had taken a somewhat lengthy route so as to pass by the mansion, with the faint hope of running into Mii by any chance.

Just when my path was crossing the mansion, I noticed that someone was standing by the entrance door.

It was past 08:00pm; had she been visited by someone at such a late hour? Upon taking a closer look, I recognized the visitor as Asami-chan's mother.

Is she complaining about Asami-chan's late return? I wondered, and decided to step in should the situation get out of control as I sneaked through the gate onto the lawn.

However, my concerns proved to be unnecessary: The mother turned around to leave, and noticed me.

"Who are..." she muttered, probably having momentarily mistaken me for a ghost or some shady figure. "Do you still have business here?"

"No, I was just passing by. But what are you doing here, Yanagi-san?"

"...I was apologizing for Asami's sudden visit. You shouldn't come here anymore, either. Mii's not here."

"How can you tell?"

"Well, just..." she started but did not seem to have a reason for her claim.

"You're on bad terms with the owner of this mansion, right?"

"I just have trouble understanding her, that's all! It puzzles me how she can

put cats ahead of everything else. For instance, her neighbors once complained about the noise of her cats and she just ignored them."

"Is that all you're bothered about?" I asked.

"...There's also this rumor that someone spotted a child in her mansion... even though she has no grandchildren. She's keeping someone hostile there, they said, and the Police actually went to check. They didn't find anything, though."

Rubbish, I thought. Those were bound to be stories made up by people who didn't like the old woman.

"Anyway, please stop looking for Mii, okay? I'll also persuade Asami to give up."

She had finally come to the point of the matter.

It was true that Asami-chan would not have been able to go anywhere near that mansion without our support; perhaps she would have given up already! I couldn't help but feel that her mother was blaming us indirectly.

Of course, she said nothing of the sort and went home. I stayed on the front lawn for a few moments so as to not run into her again when, suddenly, the lights turned on in the old woman's bedroom.

I recalled that she had said that she went to sleep at seven—had she woken up?

Looking through the window, I spotted her. Struggling against my conscience because I felt bad for peeping, I noticed something strange.

She was holding a cat. Of course, there was nothing strange about the fact that there was a cat in her room, but I had been under the impression that there wasn't because she had forbidden us to look into her room....

While I was certainly not mistrusting her, I still had to draw nearer and take a closer look.

She seemed to be tidying up something despite the late hour, standing in front of a large chest placed in the middle of the room. It was an old, wooden box with space for several cats to fit in—or a human child.

I couldn't make out what was inside because the lid of the chest, which was supported by hinges, was pointing my way. There was a mirror behind her, however, in which I could see her back. If I changed my view angle a bit, there was a chance that I could also sneak a peek into the chest.

I stretched out my head in hope to see more, when suddenly the old woman stood up. Because her position changed, the contents of the chest became visible in the mirror.

I was too far away to make out any details, but I was pretty sure that there was something moving inside. When I stretched out my head to see more, the old woman returned and I immediately ducked my head.

She stood in front of the chest again, closed the lid, and locked the chest after adjusting something with her fingers.

"?"

I almost uttered an exclamation of surprise.

Am I seeing ghosts?

I could have sworn that the chest had disappeared into thin air the very moment she had locked it.

It was Saturday, so we had half of the day at our disposal to look for that cat. When I showed up at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, all set to go searching, Saki was preparing herself to go out as well.

"Oh, you're early, Tokiya."

"I'm totally going to find that cat today," I replied.

"Saki-chan, will this do?" Towako-san asked as she appeared from the living room, carrying a black laced ribbon.

"Hm? I'm not the only one who's all set here, eh?"

"Huh?"

"Well, I suppose you're going to tie up your hair with that, aren't you?"

Saki accepted the ribbon from Towako-san, replied, "Of course," and tied her long hair to a ponytail.

We then headed to the cat mansion where we had agreed with Asami-chan to meet.

Truth be told, I wanted to widen out our search to other places. However, Asami-chan didn't show up no matter how long we waited. Since we had no other pointers, we decided to continue looking through the mansion for the time being.

"You're quite the stubborn kids...Well, go ahead. Just don't take too long," the old woman sighed.

To increase our success rate, I was in charge of the first floor this time, while Saki searched the second one. The old woman followed Saki up to the second floor.

I examined every corner of every room, but there was no trace of Mii.

Suddenly, a certain door caught my eye. I could have sworn that I had heard some Miing from inside.

It was the old woman's bedroom; a room we had not stepped our feet in so far.

We were told not to enter, but I could not get off my mind what I had seen the night before. I had recognized a cat inside that room.

With some pangs conscience I made sure no one was coming downstairs and

then broke into the private room—which might be a stretch to say because the room was not locked or anything, but it was still clearly trespassing.

I did not expect to find Mii. I just couldn't suppress the urge to find out what the deal was with the cat I had seen the night before.

There was only a bed and a cabinet; there was no TV, desk or anything of the sort.

Strangely enough, I could not catch sight of a cat anywhere. And as if that wasn't enough, there was no chest either. Clearly a chest of that size could not be hidden anywhere in this room, so I assumed she had stored it away somewhere else in the mansion.

Although I could've sworn the chest just vanished...

It was then that I noticed a photo stand on the rather low cabinet.

The photograph was old and faded, and showed a family of three. It was not hard to recognize the old woman in the young mother that was pictured in the photo. The kid was probably going to elementary school, I estimated. Next to that photograph, there was an even older picture that was monochrome and showed a baby.

Something bothered me. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was bothering me. Before I could find out what it was, however, something else caught my attention.

A hair clip had gotten stuck on the floor between behind the wall and the cabinet; one with a cute flower attachment for kids. While it seemed absurd that the old woman would put on such a childish thing, I couldn't shake off a feeling of familiarity.

I stooped to pick it up and accidentally bumped into the cabinet with my shoulder.

"Oh shi...!"

Knocked over by the jolt, the photo stand fell on the floor with a thud, and triggered anxious cries from somewhere inside the room.

"Hm?" I uttered as I turned my eyes to where I heard the crying. However, there was nothing there.

No, if I'm not mistaken this is...

I went flat on the floor and peered under the bed.

There was a bunch of cats huddling together.

Why do they hide there? I wondered because I knew the cats at this mansion as trusting and unwary.

I returned the photo stand to its former position and stretched my arm out toward the cats who then hushed away deeper under the bed. Stretching my arm as far as I could and almost reaching them, the cats scurried out from under the bed and escaped.

One of them, however, stumbled over.

Now that's a clumsy one, I thought to myself, but the cat stumbled over right again after it quickly got on its fours. It had trouble running away because it seemed to have had bad control over its legs.

I had to hold my breath with surprise when I took a closer look: The cat's left leg didn't move at all.

I turned around to the rest of the cats who had made it to a corner of the room —there was something strange about all of them. One missed a front leg, another one had one of its eyes, and so forth.

Why does she hide such cats here...?

"!" I became alert when I heard footsteps from the stairway. The two were coming downstairs.

The cats in there were bothering me, but I had no other choice but to hurry

out of the room. I made it in time by a hair's breadth: The old woman was just getting off the stairs.

In the end, there was no trace of Mii in either of the floors, and Asami-chan hadn't shown up, either. Just when we wanted to leave the mansion, however, someone knocked at the door.

The old woman sighed and opened the door to Asami-chan's mother, who was waiting outside.

"Have you seen Asami?" she asked in a pressing manner that made me suspicious.

"Did something happen to her?" I asked.

"She's missing since yesterday evening!"

The reason why she hadn't shown up at the appointed time had just gotten clear.

I looked at Saki. Her face was as blank as ever, but I noticed a touch of anxiety in her eyes. She was definitely worried about Asami-chan.

"But as I already told you, you're not going to find her here. Right, you two?" the old woman asked for our consent.

Quite true, she wasn't here. But that wasn't the problem here.

"Asami-chan has gone missing?" I asked the old woman.

"Yeah, she hasn't been seen since yesterday evening."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Hey, I thought you knew! Besides you didn't ask."

I decided to ask Asami-chan's mom about the details. She then explained to us that her daughter wasn't in her room when she went to wake her up in the morning. She immediately started looking for her, but Asami-chan was not to be found at school, at any of her friends' places or at this mansion. By the

look of the situation, she had run away from home.

"Ah!" I gasped and took the hair clip I had found in that room out of my pocket.

"That's Asami's!" her mother exclaimed.

So that's why it looked familiar to me.

"Where did you find this?" the woman asked.

"I came around it while I was searching this house for M..."

"She must have dropped it yesterday during your previous search session," the old woman interrupted me as she snatched the hair clip out of my hand and returned it to Asami-chan's mom.

It was true that there was nothing strange about finding that hair clip here because Asami-chan had been here all day the day before. Except for the fact that I had found it in the old woman's private room.

"Asami-chan hasn't been here since yesterday, correct?"

"Yeah, I haven't seen her since she left with you."

Then why was her hair clip in the old woman's room? Neither of us entered that room yesterday.

"Couldn't it be that she sneaked in without you knowing?" I asked.

"I'm fairly sure that I would notice."

"Maybe she's hiding?"

"There's no place to hide here except for the rooms. And those you have inspected, right?"

Indeed, we had searched all of them for Mii, and of course hadn't come around Asami-chan either.

"If she's not hiding in any of the rooms...you don't happen to have a chest

that is large enough for a child to fit in?" I asked half-unwittingly as I recalled what I had seen yesterday.

In an instant, the old woman contorted her face.

"Hey. Why do you..."

"Uh, I mean isn't that THE hideout for cats and children? Because I saw one earlier, you know!" I tried to talk my way out, but I failed.

The old woman became blatantly suspicious of me.

"...*Where* did you see the chest?"

"Ah, no, actually, I don't think I..."

"...So you lied? Uh-huh? You're doubting me, kid? Way to stab me in the back when I let you ransack my house! You're one unthankful brat! Get out of my sight."

"But..."

"Out!" she yelled as she drove us out of the mansion without giving us a chance to explain ourselves.

I had made a blunder; I had only ever seen that chest the day before when I was peeping. It was easy to read off her face that she wondered how I knew about it.

On the other hand, this meant that she hadn't expected me to catch sight of the chest. In other words, she was probably hiding it somewhere.

But why did she flip out when I started talking about the chest? No, she didn't make an angry impression on me. Rather, she seemed horribly unsettled.

Asami-chan's mother, who had been hunted out together with us, was giving the cat mansion a restless look.

"Why do you think she's there?" I asked curiously. While the mansion was certainly a probable candidate for Asami-chan's whereabouts, the old woman

had denied her presence. Yet, her mother kept on being suspicious nonetheless.

"...She left a message," the woman explained as she produced a letter and showed it to me. The letter said, "I'm with Mii and I won't come back until you let me keep her."

That still seemed a little too weak a reason; if she believed Asami-chan's message, then she wouldn't suspect the cat mansion unless she knew something.

"You think Mii's here, right? Why?"

"I, um..."

"Yesterday you told me Mii wasn't here, didn't you?" I pressed.

At last, Asami-chan's mother gave in and confessed: "...The truth is, I paid the old woman to adopt Mii."

"Because you can't keep Mii at your new home?"

"Yes. We made that lie up because Asami wouldn't have given up otherwise. Maybe she learnt the truth when I was discussing the matter yesterday with my husband."

"And why did you come here yesterday evening?" I asked.

"I reminded her to keep silent about this matter."

Obviously, the old woman wouldn't have feigned ignorance the day before if she had really planned to tell us anything, so that was a horribly selfish complaint.

I did not intend to meddle in their affairs, though; Asami-chan came first.

If she really found out that Mii was in the cat mansion, then she would certainly go get her. The old woman claimed that she hadn't come, but the hair clip proved otherwise.

However, it was unknown where she had gone after that. If her mother had not found her anywhere else, then the odds were that Asami-chan was still in the mansion.

It was unlikely that she was hiding, though—no matter how big the building, the old woman would certainly notice the intruder.

In other words, she knew of Asami-chan's being in the mansion and was either playing dumb or hiding her away.

Why would the old woman do that, though?

This could be easily justified when thinking back at the day before: The old woman may have changed her mind and decided to help Asami-chan with her attempt to persuade her mother.

In my view, the old woman definitely knew Asami-chan's whereabouts.

The main reason for that was because she had shown no trace of concern when hearing about Asami-chan disappearance, even though she had been worried about her late leave the other day.

As though she knew Asami-chan was safe.

Most likely, both Asami-chan and Mii were in the mansion.

However, we hadn't found Mii the day before. Saki and I hadn't found either of them today, either.

While the mansion was certainly large, there was still a limited number of hideouts.

Yet we hadn't found either of them.

It was as though they had vanished. Yes, as though they had vanished.

...And that was the answer.



I sensed that someone had been here when I returned to my room.

The fact that the cats, who would usually hide under the bed during my absence, were sitting in a corner proved my fear.

Either he tried to capture them or he tried to catch a glimpse. Even though I forbade them to enter...

What did that kid think when he found them? I wondered. Perhaps he had also discovered the photographs, but it didn't really matter to me.

Ah, this is probably where he picked up that hair clip. That explains why he suspected me so much—the little girl wasn't in this room when they searched for her cat yesterday indeed.

But then how did he find out about the Chest?

Maybe he genuinely thought of a common chest? In that case, I didn't react properly.

I guess I've been getting a little overanxious. Not that it matters. He can doubt me as much as he wants, he's not going to find the Chest.

No one is. Except for me.

Therefore no one is going to find the guilt I'm hiding inside!



In the evening of the same day, I paid the old woman yet another visit that was not exactly well-received.

"You're one obstinate boy, you know that?"

"I'm very sorry, but I tried looking for her in various places and came to the conclusion that she must be here," I explained.

"Come again tomorrow. I want to go to sleep."

It was 06:45pm, which meant that I had 15 minutes since she went to bed at 7pm. That was more than I needed.

"It won't take long. I only want to ask you a few questions. Do you *really* not know where Asami-chan has gone?"

"I do not," she replied bluntly.

"I don't mean to repeat myself, but is there really no place to hide in your mansion?"

"There isn't," she assured.

"None at all? Is there no attic? A shed? An old well? Or an unused room, perhaps?"

"There is neither a shed nor a well on my grounds. And almost *all* of my rooms are unused, if you haven't noticed."

"...then how about a large chest where a child could hide in?"

"There is no such thing here. Understood?" she said in a slightly aggressive—no, uneasy—tone.

However, she didn't seem to be willing to come out with the truth.

Well, then I'll have to uncover it myself.

There are rules to hide and seek, and they must be obeyed—even more so if breaking them may result in danger.

"Are you sure?" I asked once more.

"Listen boy..."

"I'm talking about a chest like that one over there," I said as I pointed toward the yard.

The old woman's eyes followed my finger and opened widely: A large chest

had appeared from nowhere and was bathing in the evening sun.

It was a beautifully adorned chest with a lid attached to it that could be pushed backward. And it was large enough for multiple cats or a child to fit into.

"I understand. So that's the only one you have, right? Well, then let me take a look inside just in case."

I turned around and started walking toward the chest.

"Care to join me?" I asked.



This can't be! I thought with utter astonishment.

What is the Chest doing here...? It's still too early for it to appear!

What did that boy do...? Why did he notice?

Hold on. Maybe he knew all along. Maybe the fuss about the cat was all a lie and he was really after the contents of the Chest!

No, that's not possible. He can't have known of the Chest.

But then why...?

Maybe he saw me. I remember sensing someone's gaze on me last time, so maybe he was watching.

I acted negligently. I didn't expect anyone to be watching because no one ever was up until now. The only thing I paid attention to was to be in my room at 7pm.

Anyway, it's no use crying over spilled milk. The question is how he managed to summon the Chest ahead of time.

No, even that does not really matter now.

If I don't act, that brat is going to open the Chest. He is going to see what's inside!

I absolutely have to stop that, or there will be no way back.

What do I do? What should I do? How can I...?



I turned my back on the old woman and walked toward the chest, hearing her follow me with unsure steps.

The reaction she had shown upon spotting the chest was proof that there was more to it.

No, let's be clear.

That chest was no doubt a Relic. I had by no means been seeing things when the box vanished the other day.

The true reason why the old woman had not told us where Asami-chan was and why she had reacted so sharply when we asked about the chest was not because of the contents of the chest, but the chest itself. Because if that chest was a Relic, then she certainly didn't want anyone to know about it.

I could understand that sentiment. The desire to keep special things a secret is perfectly normal.

I had come to see a lot of people like that, and therefore I knew how to deal with them.

They talk their way around your questions if you ask them directly. They try to get away. Thus, you have to cut their escape route.

I hurried to the chest and stood in front of it, blocking the old woman's way.

"That's a large chest you have there. I bet a child could easily hide in there."

"Y-You think so?" she stammered.

I tried knocking at the chest. "Hm? I could swear that I just heard something moving inside."

"Y-You think so?" the old woman said as she positioned herself behind me.

"Care if I take a look? No, you don't, right? Well, here we go!" I said without waiting for her approval, undid the buckle on the chest and slid my fingers under the lid.

It was then that a painful noise rang in my head—

What I saw upon turning around was the old woman holding aloft a rock with both her hands. The rock was the size of a child's head and light enough for her to lift, but it was still more than enough to serve as a deadly weapon.

With bloodshot eyes, she threw the rock at me. Taken by surprise, I had no chance of evading and passed out to the sound of something breaking.

—However, that wasn't reality.

It was but the future my Relic showed to me.

My right eye was artificial. A Relic named "Vision" had been implanted where once my real eye had been.

"Vision" would show me the immediate future. However, it wouldn't just show me all of the future. I couldn't foresee the winning number of a lottery, or the winner of a sports match. Not even the weather. Nor could I see any future events at will.

But there was one type of future it would show me without fail.

That is, when I or someone I knew was in danger. At those times, it showed me the moment of their death.

When that happened, a pain would run through my head, much like static TV noise, followed by a cut-in of the future. And then I would take another action than in the future shown, trying to prevent the predicted death.

"....."

What's going on?

I realized that I had apparently got something wrong. According to my guesswork, this case could be explained like this:

After receiving Mii from Asami-chan's mother, the old woman hid the cat away in the Chest until the Asami-chan would calm down. However, the old woman started to feel pity for the girl and helped her get her mother's approval by making the mother believe Asami-chan had run away from home when she was hiding in the Chest together with Mii.

There was simply no better place to hide than a chest that could disappear.

However, the vision I had just seen was way too heavy for a case like this.

Why would she want to kill me just for looking into the chest...? If only Asami-chan and Mii were inside, there would be no reason to do that.

Relics and their magic may appear useful and beneficial at first glance, but many people drown in the power and end up ruining their life. Towako-san never failed to remind me of that.

Saki and I, too, had found ourselves at the verge of death because of Relics.

The old woman may have only wanted to help Asami-chan and Mii by hiding them inside the Chest, but it was entirely possible for the Chest to have unexpected side effects that could prove life-threatening for Asami-chan or the old woman herself.

That's why I wanted to uncover her secret before it was too late.

Is the situation more advanced than I anticipated...? I thought to myself.

"Madam. What is it that you want to hide so badly?" I asked without turning around and heard her hold her breath. "I do not yet see what you are about to do, so please stop it before I turn around. I will have to take action otherwise."

"....."

A dull sound notified me that something had just fallen to the ground.

I turned around to the old woman who was had sunken down to the ground with a big rock lying by her side.

"Madam, please tell me what you are hiding. What's inside that chest?"

"Why don't you just open it..." she replied vapidly.

"I want to hear it from you. That chest is a Relic, isn't it?"

The old woman slightly raised her cast-down glance in response to my question. "Yes, I think that is what it was called. It's been so long that I don't quite remember, though."

She has had the Chest for so long...? I commented in thought.

"I wonder why it suddenly appeared, though..." she muttered.

"What do you mean?"

"I set it to appear at 7pm, you know..."

"You 'set' it?"

"You don't know how it works? Well, the Chest keeps its contents in the exact same state and it can be configured to disappear and appear before its owner at a specific time."

With this, I finally knew why the Chest had seemed to disappear when I was

peeping on her. And why we hadn't found it anywhere no matter how thoroughly we searched.

"It's really useful! A perfect fit for hiding old sins."

Sins—that word sent chills down my spine.

It seemed like the situation was indeed worse than expected.

Had already something happened? Had I come too late? My worst fears started to fill me with anxiety.

It was 7pm. The moment the hour hand of my watch pointed at the seven, I sensed that something appeared and the old woman's eyes widened yet again.

A chest had literally appeared from nowhere right before her eyes.

It was a beautifully adorned chest with a lid attached to it that could be pushed backward. And it was large enough for multiple cats or a child to fit into.

"I owe you an apology: I tricked you."

The chest that had appeared before 7pm was just a dummy—a fake Towako-san had once bought. In fact, it was probably a fake of exactly that chest, since it did not only resemble the old woman's one, it was also said to have similar powers when Towako-san acquired it.

It was the first time that one of her poor buys came into use.

"I'll open it."

The old woman was too discouraged to resist.

I undid the buckle on the chest and slid my fingers under the lid.

I felt warmth.

Unlike the empty chest I had brought, there was something warm inside this one. A living being.

Although perfectly aware that I had to hurry up, I found myself in doubt. The old woman's *sins* were sealed inside this chest. Expecting the worst—and praying that this worst case wasn't entirely reached—I opened the lid. There was a little girl sleeping inside.

"Who is this girl...?"

It wasn't Asami-chan. It was another young girl.

What's the meaning of this?

Apparently, I had been completely off the mark with all my worst expectations.

With a smile of ridicule, the old woman explained the situation: "It's my daughter!"

Her explanation didn't sit well with me in the least.

No matter how you looked at it, the woman was too old to have a young child that was just about two or three years old. Moreover, the child in the family photograph I had discovered in her room was clearly around the age of a middle school student.

"!"

No, wait. There was a second picture.

There was one more photo in that room. One picturing a child about the age of the girl lying before me.

Back then, I thought it was an older picture of the same girl. With this, however, I finally knew what was off and what had bothered me:

The photo was too old.

The monochrome picture of the young girl was way too old compared to the color photo of the family of three. It was approximately dozens of years older than the color year. The inconsistent age difference between the girl and the photos had sounded my alarm bells.

In other words, those two are different children...?

"I already gave birth when I was fifteen, you know. Everyone tried to talk me into aborting the child, but I didn't bend. My partner and I almost literally eloped and tried to bring our child up by ourselves. It didn't last long, though; he was still immature and ran off one day. Well, I guess he didn't do too bad since we managed to stay together for 2 years.

"I was eager to raise the child on my own nonetheless, but do you think a teenager girl would be capable of that? No dice. I was powerless. But I couldn't bring myself to leave the child to an orphanage, either, let alone abandon it. That's why I put it into the Chest! Vowing to raise it when I was a proper adult."

The Relic had probably appeared before her when she needed it the most—one with a power that was a perfect match for her case.

"I returned home to my former life and pretended that someone had adopted the child... life became so easy again. No empty stomachs, no freezing cold, and most of all, I could enjoy my youth. I also fell in love again and got married—but this time my family and friends gave me their blessings. We also had a child... which of course hindered me from taking my other daughter out of the chest. I hadn't told my husband about my past, and there was absolutely no way to explain how a child that should have been a teenager by then was still only 2 years old. I ended up keeping her a secret and well, here I am. An old hag. I have outlived my husband and my daughter—I'm just too old to raise her."

She was speaking in a self-mocking tone, but I was sure that she had *never* forgotten that child. Surely, she had made sure the child was safe and well

whenever she could, setting the Chest to appear before her regularly.

"I really don't know what I should do about her..." she sighed as she gave me an exhausted look. "You wouldn't happen to be willing to take her?" she asked.

However, I did not answer her cry for help.

"Can you really abandon it? Can you, who was disgusted by cat owners who abandoned their pets, really abandon your own child? Looking after homeless cats is not going to free you of your guilt. As long you live, it is *your* duty to bring up your daughter."

People and cats are essentially the same in this respect; nobody deserves to be abandoned.

"You're quite merciless..."

I clasped the little girl who was slumbering inside the chest in my arms.

She was warm. She was alive.

Who could ever abandon such a lovely child?

I passed the child on into the arms of the old woman.

"...I always made sure not to hug her, you know?" she said. "Because I would no longer be able to abandon her otherwise..."

I picked up the Chest and took my leave—so that she would never again give in to the temptation of hiding away her sins.

I had been absolutely blind; I had been too fixed on the Chest after seeing it in action, and was preoccupied by the idea that Asami-chan was hiding there.

It had completely slipped my mind that there was another place where she could hide; that there was another person that she could rely upon.

I was a bloody fool.

"Come out, Asami-chan," I said.

A moment later the girl appeared carrying Mii... from Saki's room.

The whole story went like this:

Asami-chan's mother paid the old woman to look after Mii because pets weren't allowed at their new residence. However, she also made sure to cut off the characteristic black fur on Mii's ear and take off her collar, so that the cat could no longer be identified.

I thought that the old woman wasn't willing to return Mii because she didn't do so at the beginning, but that was a misunderstanding: She simply didn't know which cat was Mii.

The cats she kept in her own room were cats that were terrified of people and other cats because of injuries and mistreatment. That's why she prohibited us to enter. Mii was also one of them because of the injured ear.

However, when Asami-chan's mother showed up, the old woman realized which cat Mii was and gave the cat back to Asami-chan out of compassion when she came to her at night.

Upset at her parent's decision, Asami-chan then ran away from home in order to force them to approve of her wish to keep Mii. My original assumption was correct up to this point, but I got her partner in crime wrong.

Saki was the one who Asami-chan relied on, and Saki's room was the place where she was hiding at. Asami-chan had probably asked Saki to keep it a secret—even to me.

Asami-chan didn't trust me and the old woman yet, since we had only met the other day. The only person who had gained her trust was Saki.

The reason why the old woman wasn't concerned about Asami-chan's disappearance was probably because she had a hunch where the girl was hiding. Come to think about it, she was upstairs together with Saki during the second search session. I doubted that Saki had told her about Asami-chan, but maybe she had seen through Saki.

In truth, it was a trivial incident.

"Don't think bad of Saki-chan! She was just helping me! I'm sorry for the trouble I caused you! I'll try to talk it out with mom, and if she says no, I'll ask the granny," Asami-chan said as she stroked Mii's head.

Certainly not understanding anything of what we were talking, Mii meowed once.

In the end, the Asamis reconsidered moving out of the house they had rented and revoked the rental contract for their new apartment. Apparently, her mother had realized her mistakes and changed her mind.

As for the old woman: She decided to take responsibility and bring up her daughter by herself, pretending to have adopted her from a remote relative. In order to atone for her sins, she would not be a "mother" but a "grandmother".

Saki, on the other side, bitterly regretted keeping secrets from me.

As a matter of fact, she had been burning to let me in on the truth, seeing how desperately I was looking for Mii, but she couldn't bring herself to break the promise she had made to Asami-chan.

The black ribbon, too, had actually been for Asami-chan because she had lost her hair clip.

Honestly speaking, I was indeed somewhat offended by her not telling me anything.

"I'm sorry."

...But I decided to forgive her when seeing her sincerely regretful attitude.

"As a punishment *you* shall carry the shopping bags."

As we continued the shopping trip we had started a couple of days ago—albeit with reversed positions—I reflected on this time's incident.

Everyone had kept secrets from the others.

Asami-chan's mother concealed fact that she had sold Mii for the sake of a new residence.

Asami-chan's concealed the fact that she had reclaimed Mii for the sake of getting permission to keep her.

Saki concealed the fact that she was hiding Asami-chan for the girl's sake.

The old woman concealed Asami-chan's whereabouts, also for the Asami-chan's sake.

However, the old woman had one more secret that was completely unrelated to all the other ones—a secret that was concealed by means of a Relic.

I had erroneously tied that secret to this case and messed up. Blinded by the Chest, I had not noticed the other secrets.

Every one of us has a chest of varying shape, color and size.

A secret chest in which we hide things that no one must see, that no one must take from us.

I, too, had one thing that I wanted to hide away in such a "chest": the embarrassing truth that I had boasted about my reasoning that was all wrong.

Well, my flawed reasoning ultimately saved a child, so it's all OK under the bottom line, I consoled myself.

Suddenly, I recalled one thing the old woman had said to me when she told me about her future plans.

"You make a real poor detective."

...shut up.

Puppet

The good you do for others is good you do yourself.

I suppose this proverb suggests that you should help others as much as you can because it will eventually serve yourself. I'm not going to disagree and say that it's wrong to help others out of greed for a reward.

However, you should always keep in mind that the "good" you do for others might occasionally backfire at you and those around you.

You should always think it through before you force your help upon someone.

Well, if I told her that, she would surely tell me to follow that advice myself.



Immersed in our own little world, we spun together a clumsy story that would replace the dreams we could not have.

We would escape from the west and the east and go somewhere far away where no one knew us.

We would be surrounded by lots of puppets that we would wind up every morning and live happily with.

I would learn the craft of tailoring and make pretty clothes for them, and on nice days, I would take them for a walk.

"Do I get none?" he would sulk. "Of course I'll make your clothes first," I would reply.

"You can't take all of them with you at once," he would worry. "Then let's decide on an order so that there won't be any quarreling," I would reply.

And one day we would become human and have children and give them puppets for their birthdays every year, we said as we weaved this ephemeral fairy-tale.

A dreamlike tale it was that we raved about, indeed. A tale as valuable and as fragile as a dream, that would never come true.

"Would you... say my name ten times?" I asked him from the other side of the firmly locked door.

To alleviate the fear.

To hear his voice while I was still able to.

To bid farewell.

"And as soon as you have called my name ten times, you will forget about me. Its a... command!"

He remained silent for a while, but eventually he started calling my name.

"Swallowtail," he said, fulfilling my wish.

"Swallowtail," he said, savoring the name as much as he could.

"Swallowtail," he said, fighting against the tears.

"Swallowtail," he said, bracing himself.

"Swallowtail," he said, trying to comfort me with all his might.

"Swallowtail," he said, clearly.

"Swallowtail," he said, dearly.

"Swallowtail," he said, tenderly.

"Swallowtail," he said, as if it were a dream.

And then—



That day at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop turned out to be as uneventful as ever.

There was nothing as boring as waiting for customers who didn't exist to begin with; it made therefore perfect sense that I would grow listless with time. *Aah, I can't stop yawning...*

"Tokiya, you mustn't yawn at the counter," said our serious salesgirl with reproachful look. "What if a customer walked in?"

"Yeah... that would surely be a shock...! For me, because it would be our first customer today."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Oh, you're right. He'd be the first customer this *week*."

"No, that's not what I..." Saki suddenly cut off her sentence, her cheeks twitching and her eyes slightly wet with tears.

"Look! You're yawning, too!"

"I'm not," she denied my claim without batting an eye.

"But you *clearly* stifled a yawn just now."

"I did not yawn if I stifled it. And that's just because you yawned first, Tokiya."

"Don't make it my fault."

"It's a fact," she countered.

"Either way, what if a customer had entered the shop? Would you have been able to attend him properly while stifling a yawn?" I asked, probing into her cheap excuse.

"Uh," she groaned. "I... I wouldn't act like this if there was a customer."

"Neither would I. That's why it's okay to yawn as long as no one's around."

With these words, I yawned profoundly, making use of my hard-earned right to do so, and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I have to pee. I guess I'll wash my face while I'm at it. You should wash yours, too."

"...How careless of me," she said with mortifying regret for her showing the slightest sign of yawning. At least, that's the impression I got from the air around her expressionless face.

Suddenly, just when I had set my first foot into the living room behind the counter, I noticed a suit case in a corner of the shop. I remembered seeing Towako-san taking it with her on her last purchase trip.

"I told her to clear it away, but she wouldn't listen," Saki sighed.

"Who cares? This whole shop is sort of a storeroom, anyway."

Thud, she hit me.

"How can you call our shop a storeroom? Is that how a employee should behave?"

She could say whatever she wanted: with the complete absence of any orderliness on the shelves, labelling it a storeroom was perfectly valid. I hadn't said anything wrong.

"If you disagree, why don't you stow that suit case away?" I suggested.

"She'd be angry with me if I even touched it, wouldn't she?"

The purchases Towako-san made were always Relics, and some among them worked special powers just by touching them. In fact, we had once come across a statue that would kill anyone who touched it. Ever since, we were

forbidden to fiddle with any of her purchases... even though Towako-san had the bad habit of putting them somewhere and then forgetting about them.

That being said, all the articles from her last purchase a few days ago turned out to be fake; there was no real need to be over-cautious. *Just a quick look*, I thought as I pulled the suitcase toward me and opened it without further ado.

"It should be empty," Saki explained. "The contents are all on the shelves. See?"

She was right. All the fakes Towako-san had purchased on that trip were already put up for sale.

However, I then noticed something in a corner of the suitcase; it was a transparent case that was about 10cm all around.

"What's this?" Saki asked as she curiously leaned forward.

"You sure you wanna look? Aren't you at work?"

"It's fine. After all, this might wind up being a new product in our sortiment, right?" she justified herself, countering my ironic remark with unexpected flexibility. She must have been bored, too, no matter what she said.

I placed the case on the counter. It was a perfectly ordinary case by the look of it.

Inside was a key with a string twined around it. The string was transparent and became almost invisible depending on how it was lit. The key on the other hand was not an ordinary key but a wind-up key, as seen in toys and music boxes. The bow part was designed to look like wings but was dirty and rusty.

"Now what do we have here?" I remarked while raising my head and noticed that Saki's gaze was still fixed on the case. "What's the matter?"

"There's a voice..." she whispered. "A voice... I can hear a voice... What is it? What do you want to tell me...?" she asked someone who was not there as if

in a fever.

"Hey, Saki? What's wrong?"

I have a real bad feeling about this, I thought.

I reached out for the transparent cube in order to return it into the suitcase, but Saki was quicker: She picked it up and tried to open it.

"Hey, stop it! Saki!"

My voice didn't reach her; ignoring my warning, she opened the lid and clutched at the key—and abruptly yanked her hand back as if retreating from an electric shock.

"What's..." I started but I had to stop mid-sentence.

Saki was crying.

Tears were rolling down her cheeks, dripping from her chin to the floor.

"...Why?"

"Saki...?"

"Why?" she asked with a calm and sorrowful voice. "Why didn't he call my name ten times?"



Krrrz. Krrrz

From afar I heard the sound of something being wound up—the sound that served as my alarm clock.

One of my gears was set in motion and passed on the rotation to the adjacent gear, which in turn ignited another one.

I slowly opened my eyes.

"Good morning," said my master with a gentle smile on his face. He was the most skilled puppet-maker in West Town and said to be the second coming of the famous puppet-maker Automaton, despite his young age of about 20 years.

A long time ago, there had been two legendary puppet-makers in these lands. One of them was Automaton, an expert in making automated wind-up puppets, and the other one was Marionette, an expert in making puppets operated through wires.

According to the lore, their puppets were much akin to real humans, comprehending their respective masters' words, acting thoughtfully, and supporting their masters' as servants and as friends.

However, those two puppet-makers as well as their creations had long since gone lost, making it impossible to learn the truth, but there was nobody in this country who did not know of their story.

And my master was said to be the second coming of that legendary Automaton.

The puppets my master created had the reputation of acting like real people—just like Automaton's. They understood his words, acted thoughtfully, and served him.

Yes, I was one of them.

They called me Swallowtail. My black hair was softly curved like the face of the western sea and my eyes were black as the night sky when both people and puppets were in deep slumber. I was clad in a sleeveless dress, which transitioned from yellow to black, and a wavy skirt, both of which my master chose for me. The thing I loved most about my appearance, however, was the large ribbon on my back that looked like wings. He once told me that he had modeled me on a butterfly he had seen in a foreign country a long time ago.

"Good morning, master."

My morning always started after greeting my master. The first thing I would do is waking the other puppets.

Picking up the valuable wind-up key he had entrusted me with, I headed to the storeroom and the other puppets sitting on the racks.

There was a small hole on their backs. It was my task to put the key into those holes, and wind them up. When I rotated the key, the puppets started to move as if life had been breathed into them.

I loved the pleasant sound of winding up a spring.

"Good morning. Such beautiful weather we have today; it will be a wonderful day," said the baron as he lifted his hat.

"Good morning. You're one minute late today," complained the clock man in passing as he came out of his window, as strict about the time as ever.

"Good morning. I want to sleep some more..." said sleepyhead while rubbing his eyes.

"Good morning. I will perform the finest dances today," said the dressed-up ballerina as she performed a pirouette.

The other puppets, too, had life breathed into them when I wound them up: The soldier puppet started to march with his rifle, the children dashed away merrily, and the orchestra commenced their music play.

When applied, this key will let a puppet act as if it were alive. So please wind them up everyday—

This wind-up key was a valuable instrument of my master's that could breathe life into wind-up puppets.

And these puppets were valuable memories of his childhood. Even though unlike me, they were ordinary wind-up puppets, my kind master did not forget about them.

I continued to wind up many more puppets, all of which wished me a good

morning me once awakened. The more springs I wound up, the better I felt—almost as though I was winding up myself.

"Good morning everyone."

It was the start of a new day.



I was shaking in disbelief after I had heard her out.

I had heard of stories about souls or wills dwelling inside of objects, but dealing with an actual case was hard to believe even for someone like me who had grown accustomed to supernatural antiques. Even more so if one of those souls or wills had supposedly changed its host body.

To make a long story short, the soul of its previous user had indwelt that wind-up key and had jumped over to Saki.

With Saki's mouth and Saki's voice, she had told me various things.

Her name was Swallowtail. Apparently, she had served and looked after a famous puppet maker, although I don't know when and where that was. The wind-up key was the tool she had used to put his puppets into motion and an irreplaceable memento for her.

However, I hadn't found out the important stuff yet.

"Why didn't he call my name ten times?"

What did these words mean? What would I have to do to make her leave Saki's body?

As unbelievable as an incident like this is in real life, stories like this can be found in movies, books and whatnot en masse—including what happens to the victims when a foreign soul takes them over.

I wanted to question her more, but as soon as she had finished, she suddenly passed off. Like a puppet whose mainspring had come to a halt.

For the time being, I picked up Saki—or Swallowtail, that is—and carried her into her room. I had to ask her more questions once she was awake again.

Suddenly, I noticed that there were black stains where Saki had touched the wind-up key.

That key was really dirty, it seemed...



I was making purchases. Master had given me a list of chemicals to buy for him. I had never heard of any of them, but he told me that he needed them for his puppets.

That day, something unusual happened.

"Swallowtail."



Hearing my name being called, I looked around but there was no one.

"Upward, I'm up here."

My gaze was pulled up by the voice's words. A boy was sitting on the wall, who had a remarkable, carefree smile on his tanned face. Happy that I finally noticed him, he waved at me.

This is what they call 'hitting on someone'—there's no doubting it!

I quickly looked ahead again and stepped away.

"Eh, hey there!" He jumped off the wall and landed right in front of me. *How acrobatic*, I thought. *No, I shouldn't be surprised but rather get away from here.*

"I was looking for you, Swallowtail."

"?"

He was speaking to me like to an acquaintance, even though I didn't know him.

"Um, have we met somewhere?"

"Huh? Swallowtail? Do you not remember me?"

"You must have gotten the wrong person."

Ah, or the wrong puppet maybe?

"The wrong person? What's your name?" he asked me.

"I'm Swallowtail. The attendant of the western puppet maker."

"Attendant? Of the western...? But isn't that the famous puppet maker from West Town?"

"Famous?" ... *Well said, young man*, I thought, unable to suppress a content smile. No servant who isn't happy when her master is praised. "It seems that you have done your homework. Yes, you're right. I serve the famous puppet

maker of West Town."

I had originally planned to run away, but having revealed my identity, I had to protect my master's reputation.

"...I see. I must have... confused you with her."

"Did you understand at last?"

"I'm Spider. Please forgive my rudeness!" he apologized as he shook my hand.

"Spider? That's a peculiar name, and we don't often see the kind of face you have around here."

"Yeah, I have only just arrived from East Town."

I wasn't surprised to hear that my master was also well-known in East Town. As I indulged in a satisfying feeling of pride, I became curious about what they said about my master.

"Could you tell me more about you?" Spider asked.

"Sure. If in return you tell me about my master's reputation in East Town."

I then questioned him about the rumors of my master and the reputation of his puppets in East Town. The rumors had spread far it seemed; Spider could tell me all kinds of things.

In return, I also told him about myself, about the work I usually did as the attendant of the puppet maker from West Town.

Before I knew it, much time had passed.

Oh no, I thought, I was in the middle of making purchases.

"Okay, I have to go."

"Already?" he objected.

"I'm in the middle of making purchases."

"I see. That's a shame. Can we meet again sometime?"

"Yes, if time permits, let's chat again. I would love to hear more about East Town."

We bid each other goodbye and parted ways.

"Ah, before I forget!" Spider suddenly said after taking a few steps and turned around to me. "I'm Spider. The attendant of the famous puppet maker from East Town."

What had I done.

Of all people I had chatted with the servant of my master's archenemy, who was a puppet maker of comparable skill. The puppet maker of East Town was a woman and said to be the second coming of Marionette.

I felt mortified for having asked her attendant about my master's reputation in East Town.

Besides, why hadn't he told me who he was right at the start? I was dead-sure that he had been teasing me and was laughing at me behind my back.

When I returned home in a bad mood, however, someone suddenly clung at me.

"Help me," a girl begged in my arms.

"What's the matter?"

"Help me! Or else I'll be..."

"Come on, don't trouble me!" said a sturdy man who stood behind her. I knew him; his heavy build and bear-like face made him seem scary, but he would look like an innocent child when he smiled.

Upon realizing that the man and I were acquainted, the girl pushed me away

and tried to escape, but he caught her in the blink of an eye. Before she knew it, she had been thrown into a wagon.

"She's the new...?" I asked the man.

"Yeah, she's the new slave."

In this country, slave dealing was established in law. Parents could therefore sell their children without any penalty, and slave traders could buy children off their parents without any penalty. Among other things, the man before me was also involved in slave trade.

"Oh boy, why are people always so stubborn?"

"Everything would be so much better if there were more of my master's puppets, wouldn't it?" I suggested spontaneously and was quite fond of this idea. That being said, it appeared to be difficult even for my master to build puppets of my level. Even the legendary Automaton had in his entire lifetime only once succeeded in making a puppet that couldn't be discerned from a real person.

I was fairly proud of being special.

"Yes, indeed. Why don't you tell him that we would love to see more of them?" he agreed with a laugh, unfolding his face to a child-like smile.

"No, I'm sorry. If he worked even more than he already does, he would surely collapse."

Besides, I want to stay special.

"Hm? Come on, you just don't want him to lose the time that he now spends for you, ain't I right?"

I felt blood running up into my head because he was spot-on. I looked like a spoiled child!

"Joke aside, is your master at home right now?"

"Yes. He is in his workshop. Please follow me." With these words I led the man to my master.

I was aware of the bad reputation that came from associating with slave drivers but I didn't personally think that bad of the slavery law. Families could survive thanks to the money earned by selling their children, and the enslaved children were given work to do. Although it was of course deplorable for families to be torn apart, I was convinced that if the children found a good master to serve, they wouldn't mind it in the long run.

...Or was it because I was a puppet that I could think like that?

Krrrz. Krrrz

Again my morning started to the mechanic sound of being wound up. My master welcomed me with a smile when I returned from the dreamland, and then I started my routine of winding up all the puppets.

"Good morning. What beautiful weather we have today; but it would seem to me that it is cloudy in your heart. What is the matter, my dear?" greeted the baron as he lifted his hat.

"Good morning. You're 3 minutes late today," complained the clock man in passing as he came out of his window, as strict about the time as ever.

"Good morning. I want to sleep some more..." said the sleepyhead while rubbing his eyes.

"Good morning. Strange... I feel so stiff today," said the pretty ballerina as she performed a pirouette. However, today her pirouette wasn't nearly as smooth as it used to be.

"Miss Ballerina? Are you feeling unwell?"

"Yes... Maybe I have caught a cold?"

"Shall I notify master?" I offered.

"Yes, please. If time permits, I would be thankful if he could take a look."

After I had finished winding everyone up, I asked my master to take a look at the ballerina, but he told me that he was busy and would deal with it the following day. He was a very busy man.

"Swallowtail."

I was again making purchases when suddenly I heard my name being called from above like the day before. Paying no heed to him, I walked on.

"Hey, Swallowtail...!" Spider groaned as he jumped off the wall and landed before me.

However, I still ignored him and passed him by as if he weren't there to begin with.

"What a bummer. That means I'll have to dispose of the sweets I've brought from East Town, huh."

My feet stopped against my will.

"You would absolutely love them, Swallowtail."

"....."

The candy Spider gave me came in a rich variety of colors, made of melted sugar that was then colored and hardened. It was the first time I tried this type of candy, but the taste was accompanied by a faint feeling of nostalgia. They were sweet and delicious.

"D-Don't think you can tame me with some candy!"

"Of course not. You stayed to listen to what I have to say, right?"

"Uh..."

I had originally planned to leave right away, but if I went now, it would seem as though I had only been after his candy.

"O-Of course!" I replied boldly. "Because it would be mean to ignore you!"

"That's good to hear. By the way, how do you like the candies?"

"They're delicious."

"Is it the first time you had some?" Spider asked me.

"Yes. I haven't even seen them before."

"I see..."

"Is there a problem?"

"No no. I was just surprised that they are unknown around here."

"Yes, but we do have similar candy made of honey. They are just as delicious!"

"Then I would love to taste some," he replied.

"Fine, I'll bring you some in return next time."

"Promise?"

"Sure," I said in return and only then noticed that I had just made an arrangement to see him again. He had twisted me around his little finger even though I had been so cautious of him at the beginning

I stared closely at him.

"What's it all of a sudden?" he asked startledly.

"What is your aim?"

"My aim? Well, I wanted to talk with you."

"About what?"

"Um, about what kind of place West Town is?"

"Then take a look around. You *are* in West Town, after all."

"That's not what I mean... maybe I should say that I'm interested in the

puppets of the west?"

"Did the puppet maker of East Town perhaps send you to spy out my master? I'm as silent as a grave!"

"No, that's not it! Besides, if I wanted to do that, I could just buy one of his puppets, no?"

"Good point," I admitted.

"Moreover, it's not like I don't know how the puppets here differ from those in the east. They're all designed to be wound up, right?"

"Those in the east are operated via wires if I'm not mistaken? I have never seen one, though."

"Oh, you're right. We do it just like this," he explained as he took a small puppet out of his pocket that had the face of a friendly jester. There were a total of ten wires attached to the puppet's head, hands, feet, shoulders and hips, which seemed like an unaesthetic sight to me.

After he had slipped on the rings that were connected to the wire ends, he bowed—and the puppet followed suit.

"?"

With a charming smile on his face, he started moving his fingers as if playing an instrument and the puppet responded! It lifted its head, moved its legs around—it performed a particular dance.

So that's how you operate puppets with wires, I thought as I watched his performance.

The ballerina we had at home would only spin as she made turns on the platform she stood on, but his puppet carried out any number of movements if he shook fingers accordingly. I really loved the dances of our dear Miss Ballerina, but the dance Spider and his puppet performed was so special and funny that I couldn't keep myself from laughing out.

Driven by my positive reaction, Spider put his back into it and displayed an even keener and more complicated—and funnier—dance.

After his show had ended, I clapped my hands together and applauded him.

He gave me a broad smile in response. It was not the playful one he would usually show me, however, but a slightly embarrassed one.

That smile of his erased what little had remained of my original caution of him. There was no longer a wall between us, and the distance had shrunk by a large deal.

However, that felt in no way disagreeable. If anything, I felt at home.

I woke up in the morning and stood up to carry out my daily routine. Taking my dear wind-up key with me, I headed to the workshop and went about sticking the key in everyone's back and winding them up.

"Good morning. Oh dear, it might be raining today. Think twice before you hang out the laundry!" warned the baron as he lifted his hat.

"Good morning. I can't believe my eyes: You're on time today," said the clock man in passing as he came out of his window, leaving me aghast at his impudence.

"Good morning. I want to sleep some more..." said sleepyhead while rubbing his eyes.

"....."

"Oh?"

The ballerina was supposed to put her every-morning dance on display, but the ballerina did not budge. Suspecting that I hadn't wound her up enough, I twisted the key a few more times, but it had no effect and she didn't perform a dance.

"What is the matter, my dear?", and "What's the trouble?", and "What's wrong...?" inquired the awake puppets uneasily.

"The ballerina just won't dance for us even though I have wound her up."

My words triggered a commotion among the puppets.

"I can't move my body," breathed the ballerina feebly.

I dropped everything on the spot and dashed off into my master's room.

"Master!"

"What's the matter, Swallowtail?"

"The ballerina... the ballerina...!" I stammered, but still he guessed what I was trying to say and immediately headed to the workshop where he started to examine the broken dancer girl.

He would be able to mend her, I was sure.

He would make her dance again, I told myself.

He was the number one puppet maker in town; there was nothing he couldn't do.

"Oh, that's beyond repair."

My hopes were crushed with gruesome ease.

"She's full of rust inside, you see, there's no way she can move anymore.

Ah... do we have a leak?" he noted as he looked up at the ceiling. As predicted by the baron it had started to rain and water dripping from above had created a small puddle where the ballerina had been placed until a few moments ago.

It had been raining occasionally for the past few days; the rain must have been corroding her during that time. I hadn't noticed at all.

"Do not fret, Swallowtail," my master comforted me as he stroked my head, "I will make a new one for you."

"What's wrong, Swallowtail?"

I was sitting unprotected in the pelting rain when Spider approached me. Although we hadn't made an appointment or anything, I had somehow known that he would come.

"What's with that puppet?"

"It's Miss Ballerina. She stopped moving..." I explained. I told him that I had been aware of her bad condition since the day before, and that I hadn't taken the proper measures to prevent this outcome. That I was sure my master would have changed his mind had I been more insistent.

"But you informed the puppet maker of the west about her, didn't you? It's his fault that he didn't repair her in time."

"Don't talk bad of my master. I should have told him more properly. But he seemed so busy..."

"Don't blame yourself, Swallowtail," the ballerina said in my hands as to comfort me. "It's not your fault that it rained, and our master was just too busy after all."

She did not budge while she was talking—even though she used to perform beautiful pirouettes—and her words were accompanied by a high creaking. I would never see her lovely dances again, and that thought filled me with sadness.

"What did the puppet maker tell you to do with it?"

"He... told me to dispose of her because he would make a new one for me."

A broken wind-up puppet was of no worth; as deplorable as it was, it stood to reason to throw it away.

"It seems the west and the east are the same in that respect. Once something loses its value, they throw it away."

"Spider?"

"In the east, you must know, puppets are thrown away as soon as their wires become torn. They could easily be fixed, but hardly anyone bothers to do that."

Suddenly, I was struck with an idea.

"Say, Spider, would the puppet maker of East Town be able to repair her?"

Astonished, he looked at the ballerina and me for a while.

"Are you sure...?"

"Yes. Anything is better than throwing her away."

Spider accepted the ballerina from me.

"Okay. I'll see what I can do."

On the following day, I was waiting for Spider for the first time since we had met.

Impatient as I was, I was there a good deal earlier than appointed, just to be even more impatient because I still had to wait.

I was thinking back at the broken Miss Ballerina.

If my master said he couldn't repair her, then it was unthinkable that anyone else could pull off the feat. Not even the puppet master of the east.

Somewhere inside, however, there was another voice that bore faint hopes that the other puppet master would actually succeed.

Spider had said that he would see what he could do, and I found myself believing him. Believing that he would do something about it.

Suddenly, something dropped into my view, before my lowered gaze.

"?"

I startled up and saw a dancer girl spinning; the ballerina was dancing in front of my eyes. Following the ten wires that were attached to her body with my eyes, I found fingers moving around wildly, and going up a little more, I found Spider's smile.

"I asked my master to repair her. Sadly, it was not possible to remove the rust inside."

The ballerina danced around in accord with his finger movements. While her dance wasn't as spectacular as that of Spider's other puppet and while she couldn't be wound up anymore, she was once again delighting me with a charming performance.

She had been reborn as a puppet of the east.

"Here you go," he said as he put her on my hands.

"Thank you so much... Spider..." I muttered and quickly slipped on the rings attached to the wires. "Welcome back, Miss Ballerina. I'm afraid I can't wind you up anymore, but I can let you dance now instead."

I tried my best at moving my fingers and making her dance. Though different, she performed a wonderful dance.

"You're good. You don't seem at all like a beginner."

"Yes, I'm surprised myself."

"But didn't you say you hadn't even seen one of our puppets until I showed you mine? I wonder why you are so skilled?"

"I have no idea. It's like my fingers moved of their own!"

Maybe I know how to operate a puppet because I'm one myself? I suspected. In the heat of the moment, I tried even harder to make her dance.

Until suddenly—

"Stop it!" cried the ballerina desperately.

"Miss Ballerina? What's wrong?"

"Stop it, please stop this madness."

"But why? You can still dance like this! You won't end up in the trash!"

"You don't get it. I want to dance *myself*, not be controlled by someone."

"Huh?"

"Have you forgotten, Swallowtail? We are mechanical puppets! Puppets that were designed to operate on their own! I wish you would have just thrown me away instead of turning me into what I am now. I wanted to die as master has created me, as a puppet of the west."

The ballerina, now with strings that made her look like a puppet of the east, was weeping as though she were lamenting the end of the world.

As I lowered my hands and let them dangle, her body also started to dangle loosely in the air. I was shocked to see her like that when she would normally always be graceful as a swan.

"What are you doing?" someone suddenly said to me from behind.

I spun around. It was my master.

"What brings you here?" I asked him. It was very rare for him to leave the house; more often than not, he would only move between his room and the workshop.

"Someone told me that you were doing something strange outside, so I..." he stopped in mid-sentence and contorted his face.

"I take it that you're the puppet maker of the West Town?" Spider said, greeting my master.

"You..."

"Yes? Is there something wrong?"

My master was visibly surprised when he saw Spider. It looked, however, like he had mistaken him for someone. "No... m-more importantly, what do you think you're doing?" my master asked as he pointed at the ballerina that was dangling from my hands.

"Ah, you see, master, it's our Miss Ballerina, I had her..."

"I can tell. What I want to know is why there are such foul strings attached to one of my puppets!" he fulminated, forcibly snatched her away from me and threw her to the ground. The ballerina's arms got bent and her arm fell off. He didn't stop there, however, and stamped on her, producing a clattering sound of breaking parts below his foot. When he finally moved his foot away, there were the beheaded remnants of what used to be the ballerina.

"Miss Balleri..."

"Don't ever do that again, hear me? And don't get involved with this guy, either! Come, we're leaving!" thundered my master in a burst of anger and left straightway. I hurriedly followed him, not even getting around to saying goodbye to Spider, but I couldn't walk side by side with him like always.

I had thought that everyone would be happy. I had thought that my master would be delighted to see the ballerina dancing again, let alone the ballerina herself.

But I hadn't made anyone happy except for myself. I had saddened the dancer girl and angered my master.

I had been mistaken entirely.

That day, the gentle master I had known disappeared.

He stopped calling me "Swallowtail" and started referring to me as "traitor" instead. I was locked into the storeroom in the basement and could neither do the household nor wind up the other puppets.

I thought of it as a punishment for the shameless act of having the ballerina repaired without his consent by his rival, the puppet maker of East Town, of all people.

While I could live with it because I had to atone for what I did, I was lonely not being able to talk with the others. I spent my days pondering about how I could get my master to forgive me, but I remained unsuccessful.

One day, he showed up in the basement—for the first time since he had locked me in there.

I had faint hopes that he had come to forgive me. That he would smile at me and accept my apologies.

What he said to me then, however, differed vastly from my expectations. The first thing my master said after entering the room was:

"I decided to sell you off. The merchant is coming this evening. Wait outside."

That moment, something inside me split apart.

Perhaps I had passed out in shock; next I noticed my master had already gone.

He hadn't forgiven me. No, he *wouldn't* forgive me: What I had done was not to be amended.

I stood up lifelessly.

I didn't want to put my master out by making him come all the way here to fetch me. I didn't want to bother him any more.

I left the basement and headed to the entrance, but there I stopped. *He must have gone to the workshop*, I thought, seeing that he wasn't in his room. I

went inside and opened his safe. The wind-up key my master held so dear was inside. I was reluctant to take it without his permission, but in the end I picked the key up and headed back to the storeroom.

I wanted to say goodbye.

The room was dark and engulfed in complete silence. I went from puppet to puppet, put the key into their back and wound them up.

"Good morning. Oh, is it raining today? Your cheeks are wet with raindrops, my dear," said the baron as he lifted his hat.

Yes, indeed. It seems to be raining today.

"Good morning. No, no, it's not morning at all! What has gotten into you that you wake me at this time?" complained the clock man in passing as he came out of his window.

I'm sorry. But worry not; starting tomorrow, someone more reliable will come to wake you up.

"Good morning. I still want to sleep some more..." said sleepyhead while rubbing his eyes.

Sorry for waking you up at this unusual time. But it's going to be the last time, so bear with me.

I also wanted to wind up the ballerina; I wanted to see her dance for a very last time. However, she was not to be found anymore. Nowhere in the world.

Because of me.

"Why is it raining only into your eyes?", "What do you mean by a more reliable person?", "The last time?" the baron and the clock man and the boy asked simultaneously with the other puppets.

"I am resigning from my position, everyone."

That was the best way I could put it. I just couldn't bring myself to be more

accurate and tell them that I was going to be sold or thrown away.

"We will miss you."

"I'm will keep the time to myself if you're not the one winding me up!"

"No! I don't want this to be the last time!"

They all regretted our farewell; they were sad about it. I was deeply moved by their kindness, but even more than that I was sad.

I'm such a silly. Why would I want to turn one of them into a puppet of the east when they are all so wonderful?

Please forgive me, Miss Ballerina.

Please forgive me, master.

"Please forgive me everyone. Farewell."

After a final apology I left the basement for good.

There was one more person whom I wanted to say goodbye. Whom I wanted to give thanks for everything, and apologize for the mistake I had made.

At the risk of having the door slammed in my face, I headed straight to the workshop after I had left the basement.

I heard something.

The sound of my master's working.

The sound that I had been so fond of.

The sound that I would no longer be able to listen to.

I stopped in front of the door to the workshop and peeped inside, wanting to fix this sight indelibly on my mind in case he refused to talk to me.

I gazed at his back.

I was here to bid him farewell, but I knew that if I were to step forward now, I would cling at him and beg for his forgiveness. I couldn't do that. I wasn't allowed to.

"Thank you for everything," I whispered in an inaudible voice and turned away.

It was then that I heard a feeble voice from behind me, from inside the workshop.

Is there someone else inside besides my master? I wondered as I peeped once again through the door crack.

All I could see was my master and an unfinished puppet he was working on, which already resembled a real human in every aspect and thus was probably nearing completion.

That must be my replacement, I thought. *Please take good care of him in my stead! Don't be so foolish as I was!*

After silently bidding farewell to the new puppet, I turned away again to leave once and for all.

However, I couldn't help overhearing the groaning of the puppet.

"Please... sto... p... it..."

I froze on the spot.

"You can still talk? It seems that I underestimated your willpower," my master said softly and reached for a tool.

It was a syringe.

Unfamiliar as I was with the art of puppet making, I had no idea what he would use *a syringe* for. That sort of tool was meant to be used on real people, after all.

"For...give...ness..."

"This is what you get for being a bad girl."

My master inserted the syringe into the puppet's arm and injected the liquid inside.

"...Ah...aa..." the puppet breathed. "H... elp... me..."

"!"

I was as if struck by lightning: I knew the puppet's voice!

"Who is it?!" my master yelled as he spun around. He had heard my gasping in shock.

The door opened before I could even think of escaping.

"Swallowtail."

Never before had I seen such coldness in my master's eyes as in that moment.

After he had cautiously looked around and confirmed that we were alone, he pulled me into his workshop and slammed the door.

"Didn't I tell you to wait outside? Why do you keep getting in my way?"

"M-Master? This girl, she is..."

Before I could pose my question, I was slapped and fell to the floor, banging my head against the leg of the bed and rattling the girl puppet's head from the bed.

Our eyes met.

There was no more doubting it. It was that girl who had sought my help the other day and was sold by her parents.

Why is she here? I wondered. *No, why is my master giving injections to humans?*

As a bunch of questions arose, there was a certain thought that came slipping through between them. No matter how much I tried to ignore that thought, I

couldn't keep it from surfacing. At the same time, my subconsciousness tried to put a lid on that doubt in order to protect me.

But it was too late.

The puppets created by the puppet maker of West Town act like real people—

Once cast, those doubts didn't disappear anymore.

"Did you turn people into puppets all along?" I asked him, feeling the temperature in the room drop rapidly.

"You're a bad girl. I wanted to leave your disposal to others, but it seems I can't do that anymore. Don't let her go."

When I tried to flee, someone suddenly seized me from behind. Turning my head as much as I could, I could see that it was the girl who had just been turned into a puppet.

"Good girl."

"Thank you very much," she answered him.

She was acting as though she had really become a lifeless puppet. Perhaps, the drug inside the syringe had the effect of numbing the mind. *So that's what those unknown chemicals were for!*

"Master, why do you do such a..."

"We puppet makers strive to imitate real people as much as possible. Our reputation is defined by the resemblance of our work to real people, and therefore, we keep honing our skills toward absolute resemblance. One day, however, I came to the realization that there is no value to puppets themselves if their defining quality is their humaneness... I realized that I could just as well use humans from the get-go."

"That's just..."

"Tell me: What do you think about the puppets that I made in my youth, those in the storeroom?"

"They are wonderful."

"And that's what they also told me back then. But how do they resemble real people when they can only do a set of predetermined actions and look nothing like a person? They're trash," he countered.

"So you decided to make puppets using humans?"

"Hm...? What is it with that reproachful glance? Don't look at me like that!" he shouted as he produced a handgun.

I tried to escape, but I was still seized.

"And yet again you make me go through all this..." he muttered, thumbing back the hammer of the gun and aiming at me. "You're an evil woman."

An instant before he pulled the trigger, someone suddenly broke through the door and came to my rescue.

It was Spider. Taking full advantage of the momentum, he bumped into my master, spun around and knocked the girl seizing me over. I almost fell to the ground, but he caught me.

"Spider..."

"I'm sorry. I should have come to your help sooner," he apologized as he held me in his arms. "But I had to learn the truth behind his trickery." Spider's eyes were fixed on my master who was struggling back on his feet.

I called our first encounter back into my mind; he seemed to know me, and called me by my name. I also recalled my master's disturbance upon seeing Spider a few days ago.

"You already knew us after all, didn't you, Spider?"

For a split second, he gave me a desolate look.

"I've been here once before—together with my own master, the puppet maker of the east. I wasn't here for long...but let's save that for another occasion," he explained and whispered into my ear, "You must flee."

The girl was still lying on the ground. This was our chance to escape.

"Go!" he shouted and I ran off. I'd thought Spider would follow me, but instead, he ran in the other direction to my master.

"Spider!"

"Don't stop!" he yelled back at me without turning around. I had already turned around to him, however, and therefore witnessed the smile glued on my master's face and saw how his mouth formed a sentence.

"I command you to stay put."

That was all that he whispered. However, his words were like a curse to Spider and caused him to halt on the spot.

"You stand no chance against me," he guffawed as he approached Spider. Spider had no other choice but to stand still and wait for him, just as though put under a spell. "Weren't you told to go home? I didn't expect to see you again here. Although, I have to admit, you obeyed that order just fine in a sense. Anyway, I shall dispose of you here and now."

He aimed his handgun at Spider.

He's going to be killed! I have to do something...but what?

"Let me ask one thing before you get rid of me."

"Hm?"

"That wind-up key. When you wind up a puppet with that key, it will act like a living being, correct?"

The wind-up key...? I slid my hand into my pocket and touched the key.

That's it. With this I can...

"Did she tell you about it?" asked my master suspiciously.

"Just answer my question. But that wind-up key..."

"Master!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.

He looked at me and was dismayed to recognize what I was holding in my hand.

"Please let go of Spider. If you kill him, I will run away and throw this key away somewhere."

The wind-up key was my master's treasure; it was so valuable to him that he would store it in a safe. His attitude changed at once.

"W-Wait...I got it, so give it back to me," he said as he slowly approached me, leaving Spider behind.

"No, Swallowtail! Flee!"

"Tch!" My master clicked his tongue and pointed his handgun at me.

I had made a mistake. I should have ordered him to throw away his gun first.

I was frozen on the spot as his finger operated the trigger—but in the nick of time, Spider bumped into him from behind and fell on top of him.

"Tch! You can move already?!"

My master was faster at standing up and started to beat him with his fists—over and over, like in a fury.

Spider is going to die, I feared. I must help him—

"I'll make sure you won't move for evermore!" my master said and searched his surroundings with his glance.

He didn't find what he was looking for; for it was already in my hands.

I pulled the trigger of the gun I was holding with both my hands.

A gunshot resounded through the building.



"Ah...ah..."

My ears were ringing and my head was aching. I was under such pain that I teared up.

Right, I was crying because of the pain. Not because I had shot my master. Not because I grieved about him.

After all, how could I be sad about his death when I was to blame for it?

"Swallowtail..."

"Spider...Spider...!" I cried into his chest.

I didn't know what I was shedding tears for, nor did I care, but I wasn't even granted the time to grieve.

"GOOD GRACIOUS...!" someone shouted. It was the slave dealer's voice. Surely, he had discovered my master's corpse, and he was able to deduce from the situation that we were the culprits.

"M-Murderers...! S-Someone!"

I could hear his footsteps as he ran outside. The police would come soon, I gathered, and catch me and destroy me.

Perhaps, that was for the best. I had nowhere to go anymore, after all.

But I wasn't even granted that.

"Let's flee, Swallowtail!"

Spider took my hand and pulled me along.



"Did you find out anything?" asked Saki—it was her voice and her words—

after she had woken up in front of her room, where I had carried her.

"Have you regained control?" I asked back, anxious to know if Swallowtail, that puppet, had left her body.

Saki shook her head, however, and calmly replied, "She is only asleep now. I can still sense her inside me. I suspect that I will lose consciousness again once she awakes," while holding her hand against her chest.

"Does that mean that you will lose your body to her?"

"I don't know. Maybe we will coexist, or maybe either of us is going to disappear."

That had been one of the first things I'd apprehended when I noticed that she was taken over. In fiction it's not at all rare for people's minds to disappear into nothingness when they are taken over by a ghost or something of the like.

As a matter of fact, this exact worst case was about to come true right before my eyes.

"Why did you do that?"

I couldn't keep myself from bringing up that question. Saki was supposed to know exactly about the severe consequences when dealing carelessly with Relics. Though it is true that there was no proof for the wind-up key being one of them, the fact that it was one of Towako-san's purchases should have made us cautious.

That being said, I had considered the key to be fake as well; I wasn't cautious enough, either. However, at least I made sure not to touch it. I was aware of that taboo.

Needless to say, Saki was aware of that just as much as I was.

"I heard a voice," Saki explained.

Now that she mentions it, she did talk of a voice before touching the key.

"Her voice was so sad. She wouldn't stop asking for a reason."

'*Why didn't you call my name ten times?*'—We still had no answer for that question.

"I wanted to help her."

But that's no reason to act so carelessly, I thought. I could sympathize with Swallowtail too, but I wasn't ready to go that far for her. *It's just silly to risk your life out of pity*.

"You would have done the same in my position!"

"I don't think so," I countered.

"Oh, really? But you are doing the exact same thing all the time, aren't you? Poking your nose into others' affairs for their sake, no matter how much I'm worrying about you. Do you realize how unfair you are? It's okay if it's you?"

"....."

"But here I am relying on you anyway, aren't I..." she admitted as she gently stroked the string-shrouded key in her hands.

"Tokiya...please teach her—and me—why he wouldn't call her name ten times."



I ran. I did not think about anything else but running, not taking any breaks, not turning around; I just kept running and escaping until I arrived at a giant underground dumping ground known as the "Island of Dreams."

Island of Dreams? I wondered. *That would be the last thing I'd expect to find here.*

However, there was probably no more appropriate place for my final

destination, for this dumping ground consisted of waste that could not be burnt—like broken puppets.

We entered the "Island" and proceeded further inside. Though hesitant to tread on the disfigured remnants of disposed puppets, we were not allowed to stop.

"Swallowtail. Do you want to rest?"

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine at all."

I wasn't. My body hurt and felt leaden. I had to struggle with every step not to fall over.

"May I ask you to wind me up, then?" I finally asked.

"...Okay" replied Spider after a short pause and went on to wind me up yet again. I had lost count of how many times we had already repeated this process since entering the dumping ground.

I listened to the rattling of the key as I was wound up.

For some reason, my body just wouldn't stop feeling heavy even though I could normally fulfill my duties without a problem if my master wound me up once a day. Apparently, I did not have much time left.

Why was that?

Is it because there were days when nobody would wind me up while I was locked into the basement? Or have I become broken? I wondered. Yes, I nodded. *A puppet who kills her own master is bound to be broken.*

"Do you feel better...?" asked Spider.

"Yes. I'm fine now," I answered as I tried to stand up. I failed. I couldn't muster enough strength. I was completely perplexed as to why his winding me up hadn't had any effect. "Spider, I'm sorry. Could you wind me up one

more..."

"Swallowtail," he interrupted. "Let's...stop this. This key is of no use for you."

"Eh?"

"What you need is rest and nourishment!"

I couldn't quite follow Spider. I was a mechanized puppet who couldn't move without being wound up.

"Once upon a time, there were two legendary puppet makers called Automaton and Marionette. Their skill remains unparalleled, and therefore the puppet makers of the west and the east alike strove to emulate them—no, they strove to draw closer to the perfection of their creations," Spider began what sounded like a bedtime story.

I decided to listen closely.

"One day, the puppet maker of the east obtained a puppet and a wind-up key, which was said to be a legacy of Automaton. When the key and the puppet that came with it were used together, the puppet would start to move on its own. However, it wouldn't follow a predefined pattern but could understand words and had its own thoughts...right, like a real person. Do you see? Automaton did certainly not turn fellow humans into puppets; he turned common puppets into humans with the mysterious power of that key.

"It was truly the irony of fate that of all people the puppet maker of East Town, an expert of pull-string puppets, had obtained those items. Amused by that fact, the puppet maker took the puppet along to visit their rival in West Town, where they had a conversation during which the other craftsman had no idea he was dealing with a puppet. I can only fathom the vexation and intimidation he must have felt."

"Is that your story? The one you started at the workshop?"

"Yes. I don't know the details, but they seemed to have known each other for a long time. Maybe there was more between them. I was told to go home ahead because they had something to discuss in private. However, my master—the puppet maker of East Town—has not returned ever since."

"Not returned?"

"Yes. I tried sending a telegram, but she only replied that she would not return. However, I couldn't believe that she was being honest, so I came once again to West Town."

"You love your master, don't you?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"After all, you wanted to see her so much that you went to the trouble of traveling all the way here, right?"

"I suppose you're right. Yes, I love her! She is my only support."

I felt antsy.

I had loved my master, too, although I wasn't sure if that still held true. I may have been just another, replaceable puppet to him, but he was my everything. It was probably the same for Spider.

But in that case, what would happen to me when he returned to the puppet maker of East Town? Would I be left all alone?

"So did you get to see your master?"

"I...met her the other day in town."

Right, now that he mentions it...but I have to be happy for him. After all, he found his way back to his beloved master.

"I see. I'm pleased to hear..."

"But she didn't remember me. And not only that, she has even forgotten that she's the puppet maker of the east."

"Eh? But didn't she repair Miss Ballerina for me?"

"To tell you the truth, I did that," he admitted.

"Really? But then where is your master?"

"Right before my eyes."

I looked around. There was no one else here besides us.

"The puppet maker of West Town stole her memory through drugs, and used her as one of his own puppets," explained Spider

He looked me deep in the eyes.

"Her name is Swallowtail. She is you, and of course she is human."

So, according to Spider, the famous Automaton had used that wind-up key to breathe life into his puppets, and Spider's master had obtained that key somehow, after which she showed it to my master. He then drugged the puppet maker of East Town and turned her into a puppet like what he did to that girl.

And most importantly, *I* supposedly was that puppet maker.

Come to think of it, Spider had known my name when we first met and was saddened when he realized that I didn't recognize him.

I'm the puppet maker of East Town?

I'm not a puppet made by my master?

I'm—human?

"There is indeed a hole on your back, but that's most likely only for show and can be easily removed."

"But my master told me that winding up a puppet with this key will breathe life into them! That's why I'm able to move freely! Because you have been

winding me up, Spider!"

"That's wrong, Swallowtail," he said as he shook his head. "It wasn't you originally who operated that wind-up key. It was me."

"Huh?"

"The puppet maker of West Town didn't know how to correctly use the key, either, or simply misunderstood. That's why he wanted to interrogate me."

"But didn't you just say yourself that Automaton breathed life into his puppets by winding them up with that key?"

"No, you got the wrong idea. It is true that you can give life to puppets with this key. But it's the other way around—only the puppets who wind up other puppets with the key are affected."

It's not the puppets who are wound up using that wind-up key that can move freely?

It's the puppets who wind up puppets with that wind-up key that can?

What? Who is who?

I am the one who was wound up.

Spider is the one who wound up.

Spiders words circled in my head.

My master's words circled in my head.

One more time.

With a clear mind.

I recalled that explanation one more time.

When applied, this key will let a puppet act as if it were alive...

I finally understood.

Only the puppets that would actively wind up another puppet could move freely, not the puppets that are passively wound up.

That also explained why the ballerina and the soldier and all the other puppets in the storeroom could not move freely like a real person. Back then, I had thought that it was simply because there were exceptions to the key's power, but the truth was that we had used it incorrectly all the time.

"There is a special type of wind-up puppets that can only rotate their wrists and is meant to wind up other puppets. You just have to insert the key they are carrying into the key hole of a mechanized puppet, and you're good," he explained as he held out his wrists. "I don't know how Automaton got his hands on this wind-up key, nor do I know how he found out about its usage, but he someday put said wind-up key in the hands of one of those special puppets and had it wind up another one. As a result, the puppet in charge of winding up suddenly started to move freely, and thus became known as Automaton's best creation."

Automaton's most famous work was a common puppet made alive by the key.

"But why...why do you know about all that?"

Spider rotated the wrists he was holding out and replied, "Because I am the puppet that is said to be his best creation."

The puppet the puppet maker of East Town had found together with the wind-up key was right before my eyes. It was Spider.

"The puppet maker of the west—the man who was your master—did not have the technology to create manlike puppets. No, it's not only him—no one, not even Automaton, has the technology it takes. He was only able to create me because he happened to come across that wind-up key by pure chance. In other words...you, Swallowtail, who can move freely, think freely,

and talk freely without any need of being wound up, are *not* a puppet."

He dropped one bombshell after the other. Not in my wildest dreams had I expected that Spider had been made by Automaton himself and that there was such a secret behind that wind-up key.

However, there was one misunderstanding Spider had made.

"Spider. It seems like I'm not Swallowtail—not human—after all."

"I know it's hard to believe..."

"No, that's not it. I believe you. But I still think that I'm not your current master...I'm not human," I said as I held out my left hand like he had done earlier. "A human hand doesn't look like this, does it?"

My left hand had started to crumble, revealing a hollow, puppet-like space underneath. Spider stared at the hollow with blank surprise.

I didn't know why, but my left hand had turned black and fallen off. I was, however, not surprised to see that my hand was hollow inside, because the only point where I disagreed with Spider was the fact that I was human.

While I couldn't explain why, I was sure of my being a puppet.

One thing that proved it was the fact that I could communicate with the other mechanized puppets my master had built. They were but common wind-up puppets; there was no way that a human could understand their words. As a matter of fact, my master could not understand them, either.

But that reasoning was not even necessary; because I was reminded of it every morning.

Krrrz. Krrrz.

From afar I would hear the sound of something being wound up—the sound that served as my alarm clock.

One of my gears would be set in motion and would pass on the rotation to the

adjacent gear, which in turn would ignite another one.

Strings emulating the human nervous system would move me.

It was an established fact for me that I was a human-like puppet made of wood, resin, a clockwork motor, gears and strings.

My master must have modeled me on Swallowtail, the puppet maker of the east, when he created me. Perhaps, he had already killed the real Swallowtail—perhaps even before he could rob her of her memory and control her like Spider had suggested.

'And yet again you make me go through all this...' he had said when he was about to shoot me with his gun, and that supported my hypothesis.

I didn't know, however, why he had given me the same appearance as the craftswoman Swallowtail. Because he wanted to gloss over the murder he had committed? Or was there a different type of emotion involved?

A mere puppet like me could not understand how real people felt.

"I can't..." Spider muttered as he reached out for my left hand. However, I pulled my hand back, causing him to give me a puzzled look.

Evading that look, however, I turned around and ran deeper into the "Island of Dreams"—hiding behind a door.

I didn't want him to touch and see me while I was falling apart in such an unsightly manner. In fact, I had lost my right ankle on this short distance.

"Swallowtail?"

"I command you not to open the door!" I ordered Spider, recalling how my master had worded it, and he removed his hand from the door handle.

Apparently, it worked.

"Please open the door, Swallowtail. I've realized that you're not human. I was mistaken. But I don't care whether you're a puppet or a person—if you need me to wind you up, I shall do so. No, just use the wind-up key yourself, and

you might be saved!"

"Thank you. But it's too late."

Because—

"I no longer have hands to hold the key."



I noticed something when I placed Saki down in front of her room.

Her left hand was in an odd state.

Earlier I had thought she had gotten dirty when she touched the wind-up key, but the black stain was steadily getting bigger.

I took her hand and tried touching the black mark.

"!" I gasped.

Her hand was cold—freezing cold—as if no blood was running through it, as if it were that of a puppet.

"Saki..."

"Yes, I can't move it," Saki unperturbedly said as she looked at the black stain.

I let go of her hand—because I feared that her hand would crumble if not treated with care. Swallowtail had told me of the same symptoms, so I suspected the same thing was happening.

"Maybe we're starting to consolidate," Saki suggested.

"Get her out of your body, quick!"

"That's impossible, Tokiya. She will not yield before hearing the answer to her question."

Saki stroked yet again the string-shrouded wind-up key.

"...Saki. Throw that key away," I ordered after a sudden flash of wit.

"...Why?"

"No ifs, no buts. Throw that key away," I repeated and reached out for it myself because she didn't seem to want to part with it.

Saki pulled her hands away, however, and hid them behind her back.

"That was close," she said nervously. "You were about to get possessed, too."

"Fine, then do what I told you to. Now."

"..."

"Swallowtail will leave your body if you throw it away, am I right?"

Saki's face remained expressionless like always, but in some way or other I could sense that I had hit the bull's eye.

"Throw. It. Away."

"No! She will disappear once and for all if I let go of it even just once!"

"You'll disappear in her stead!"

Why are you so calm? Don't you realize what became of Swallowtail?

I decided to take the wind-up key by force.

Suddenly, a painful noise rang inside my head——

Before me was a door.

I was shouting something.

I was desperately knocking against the door.

The door would not open.

Someone was crumbling into pieces on the other side.

I couldn't see it, but I knew it.

I was shouting something.

I was desperately knocking against the door.

At last, the door was unlocked, as if to announce the end of the show.

I pushed the door open.

Beyond it I did not find Saki but—

"—!"

I recollected myself and reached out, but the momentary flash had delayed me; Saki evaded me by jumping into her room and locked the door.

"Open the door! Hey! Open the door!" I shouted in vain, knocking against the door.



Saki was right there on the other side and yet I couldn't reach her.

We were like Spider and Swallowtail; like our counterparts in my vision.

"Open the door! Don't you care what happens to you?!"

"..."

"As you wish! I'll break through it!"

I couldn't wait for her to listen to me; there was no time for persuading.

I'm breaking through the door! I told myself to strengthen my resolve as I stepped back, when suddenly Saki spoke to me from behind the door.

"Tokiya, she passed away before Spider, you know?"

"What of it?!"

"How do you think she felt?"

"I don't care! This is not the time to talk about stuff like..."

"We are blending together. Her feelings are overflowing inside me," Saki said. Swallowtail said. "She was scared. Sad. Full of regrets. But that's not all...there are countless emotions that keep on surfacing and vanishing. She wanted to live on, but she was glad that he was fine."

"But there is one thought that remains crystal clear: She was wondering how it feels to be left behind."

For Swallowtail, that was Spider alone.

"That's why she had him call her name ten times. She wanted to give him the chance to bid her farewell and move on."

Why had he stopped at nine times?

"I want to know," said Saki, "how Spider felt being left behind!"



What happened after that I have already narrated.

Separated by a door, we spun together a story that would replace the dreams we could not have.

As my body slowly fell apart, part by part, I had to lean against the door while I was shaping the continuation of our story, not wanting to waste a single instant of my remaining lifetime.

Until my right arm fell off, we talked about escaping somewhere far away and live surrounded by puppets.

Until my left arm fell off, we talked about how I would learn how to tailor clothes for our puppets.

Until my right leg fell off, we talked about how we would take them for a walk.

Until my left leg fell off, we talked about how I would also make clothes for Spider.

Until my torso crumbled, we talked about becoming real people.

Until my chest crumbled, we talked about our children.

Finally, until my mouth crumbled, I made my request and my order to him.

Say my name ten times, and as soon as you have said my name ten times, you will forget about me—

However, my wish was not fulfilled.

He only called my name nine times. A tenth time did not follow.

My wish was not fulfilled during the time when I still had ears, when I still had my consciousness, when I still had my life.



"The answer's obvious!" I shouted toward the door.

Why can't you understand how Spider felt when you left him behind?

Not having witnessed that scene, there was naturally no way for me to tell what circumstance hindered Spider from fulfilling her wish.

However, I did understand his feelings.

It was clearer than daylight to me how Spider felt when he was left behind.

There was only one thing that came into question.

There's only one possibility!

"He chose to share your fate if he could not be together with you!"

There was one thing that I had noticed in the story Swallowtail had told me: She mentioned that the wind-up key was the *only way* to make puppets that could act like real people.

However, there were *two different human-like* puppets in her world made mention of.

One of them being a wind-up puppet created by Automaton.

The other one of them being a pull-string puppet created by Marionette.

If one of them was Spider, who had operated the wind-up key—the other one had to be Swallowtail. She was probably a puppet given life to by a Relic that is that string.

I suspected that similar to how the eastern puppet maker had obtained Automaton's "wind-up key", the western puppet maker had obtained Marionette's "string".

Since Swallowtail seemed to resemble the eastern puppet maker, it was likely that the other puppet maker had simply redesigned the puppet to look like her. What moved the puppet, however, were Relics—the wind-up key as well as the string.

I did not know *why* Swallowtail started to crumble—maybe her lifespan as a puppet had expired or maybe the string had been damaged.

However, it was certain that the puppet maker of the west—unfamiliar with the real usage of the wind-up key—had breathed life into her using the string Relic, since it was the only means he could possibly know. She had been held alive by a string that was woven into the wind-up mechanism.

There was a reason why I was so certain of my theory, and that reason was to be found on the other side of the door in Saki's careful hands.

The wind-up key belonged to Spider; her own feelings had dwelled in another vessel—namely, the string surrounding the key.

Saki had not touched the wind-up key, but the string woven around it.

I didn't know what hindered Spider from saying her name ten times. He should have just said it ten times... no, twenty times, a hundred times, a thousand times—I don't care—he should have been by her side and fulfill her last wish.

Again, I did not know why he hadn't done so.

However, I was sure that I was spot-on about his feelings.

After all, he had been together with Swallowtail until the last moment of his life.

"Just look how the string and the key are intertwined!"

"Really...?"

The door opened. Unlike in the long-forgotten past, Swallowtail came out through the door.

Swallowtail did, not Saki.

"You see," she started, "Spider was made to unconditionally follow any order he is given, no matter whose order. That's why I commanded him to say my name ten times, and then forget about me..."

With that, the mystery was solved.

Spider would have had to forget about Swallowtail after fulfilling her wish. By stopping at nine times, he refused to forget, knowing that this was the only way to ignore her order. He had chosen not to forget.

He had probably found a way to break through the door after she had deceased, and put her string around his key.

So as to not be parted for all eternity and by nobody.

He must have stayed with her until the moment the effect of the key wore out.

"Spider..." she cried. Through Saki's body, she could finally shed tears, dearly embracing Spider's wind-up key.

"Don't you cry!"

Don't you cry with that face, those eyes and that voice. I mean, that's totally unfair; you leave me no other choice but to do this even without telling me to...

I looked at the key surrounded by Swallowtail's puppet-string.

"That's your fault, hear me, Saki?" I complained to Saki, even though she couldn't hear me.

With those words, I touched the key.



Immersed in our own little world, we spun together a clumsy story that would replace the dreams we could not have.

We would escape from the west and the east and go somewhere far away where no one knew us.

We would be surrounded by lots of puppets that we would wind up every morning and live happily with.

I would learn the craft of tailoring and make pretty clothes for them, and on nice days, I would take them for a walk.

"Do I get none?" he would sulk. "Of course I'll make your clothes first," I would reply.

"You can't take all of them with you at once," he would worry. "Then let's decide on an order so that there won't be any quarreling," I would reply.

And one day we would become human and have children and give them puppets for their birthdays every year, we said as we weaved this ephemeral fairy-tale.

A dreamlike tale it was that we raved about, indeed. A tale as valuable and as fragile as a dream, that would never come true.

"Would you... say my name ten times?" I asked him from the other side of the firmly locked door.

To alleviate the fear.

To hear his voice while I was still able to.

To bid farewell.

"And as soon as you have called my name ten times, you will forget about me. Its a... command!"

He remained silent for a while, but eventually he started calling my name.

"Swallowtail," he said, fulfilling my wish.

"Swallowtail," he said, savoring the name as much as he could.

"Swallowtail," he said, fighting against the tears.

"Swallowtail," he said, bracing himself.

"Swallowtail," he said, trying to comfort me with all his might.

"Swallowtail," he said, clearly.

"Swallowtail," he said, dearly.

"Swallowtail," he said, tenderly.

"Swallowtail," he said, as if it were a dream.

And then—

"Swallowtail," he said, as if he had treasured these words for the day we meet again.

He had said my name ten times.



"Looks like they're gone."

"Yes."

I felt as though I had lost something, as though a hole had opened, but seeing how Saki's hand had turned white again gave me reassurance.

Transcending space and time, Spider had fulfilled Swallowtail's wish, borrowing my body.

Transcending space and time, Swallowtail had obtained Spider's love,

borrowing Saki's body.

It was a dreamlike story.

"Hey, Tokiya, Saki-chan, take a look at this!" uttered Towako-san as she came running along the corridor toward us, finally leaving her room.

"What's the matter?"

"I completely forgot that there's another Relic I've bought."

She was carrying a mechanized puppet that looked like a ballerina. The puppet was in a somewhat poor condition, and some of its insides were exposed.

Inside, I could recognize the gears and wires the wind-up mechanism consisted of.

"Get a load of this! It acts like a real person if you wind it up!" she said with excitement, but I'd taken the puppet from her before she could finish.

"Tokiya," Saki said.

"Oh, I'm okay. There are only two puppets in the world that behave like real people, right?"

I wound up the puppet with the key that was incorporated at its back.

Krrrz. Krrrz.

The puppet was wound up—

Krrrz. Krrrz.

The wire inside was wound.

After I had wound the ballerina up all the way, she started to rotate on the platform that she was standing on.

"Just a puppet..." Towako-san muttered in a disheartened manner, accepting the ballerina puppet from me, and went back to her room.

"Tokiya?"

"Hm?"

"What would you do in Spider's position?"

After pondering just for a moment, I replied:

"I would search for a way for both to survive!"

In my hands I was holding the wind-up key and the string.

The string was twined around the key, but to me it looked like—the key was twined around the string.

Dream

I had a nightmare.

A horrible nightmare.

Despite that, I can't remember what it was about.

Despite that, I do clearly remember how horrible it was.

This isn't the first time I've had this experience, or in other words, I feel that I have seen and forgotten this dream many times already. I can't recall it no matter how hard I try — the dream leaves behind only a lingering, bad but vague aftertaste.

That bad taste turns into a sticky, vicious lump rasping on my heart.

Desperate to spit out all the discomfort that has bottled up like coal tar inside, I try to recall the dream.

But like always, I fail.

The discomfort will eventually fade away; until the dream haunts me again, giving me once more the same feelings, and this keeps repeating.

What's the deal with that dream?

I don't know.

But every time after I've had it—every time when I awake from that fleeting dream—there is one thought that crosses my mind without fail:

Thank god it was just a dream.



We used to go to a fast food restaurant every day after our club activities.

He was the player, I was the manager.

He was my senior, I was his junior.

But those comparisons are not suitable to describe our relationship. The most suitable expression must be—

He was my boy, and I was his girl.

The one who had taken the initiative was me. My heart was racing like crazy when I asked him to go out with me; and I was on cloud nine when he accepted.

My life was so colorful from that day on.

I loved how he would run across the playing field.

I loved how he would laugh together with his friends.

I loved how he would stuff his mouth with food.

I loved how he would stroke my head while praising me.

I loved how he would hold his head because of bad marks.

I loved how he would shed bitter tears whenever he lost a match.

I loved everything about him, and I thought that I didn't need anything except him.

It may sound terribly corny, but I was really thinking like that at the time.

"Do you want to go on a trip with me during the weekend?" he once asked me out in a slightly timid manner.

It was the first time he invited me to go somewhere overnight, and I wasn't so dense as to not understand what his request implied.

I also realized that this must have been the reason why he had seemed so restless that day. He must have been thinking about a way to ask me all the time. No, perhaps he had been practicing all night long.

I couldn't help finding him adorable, even though he was my senior.

I also loved this side of his.

I really loved him with all my heart.

"Something wrong?"

"Mm, I was just thinking that I'm so lucky."

"Oh come on."

"I wish this time would last forever."

"It will! You have my word on it."

"Mm."

Truly.

If only this time would last forever—

A...dream...?

I was looking at a blurry ceiling.

There was no trace of him. Neither before my eyes, nor anywhere else in the world—

"Maya? Are you awake?" my mom said as she knocked at the door.

Her solicitude reached me through her voice and past the door, but even such warmth was terribly uncomfortable to me at the moment.

"Won't you try to eat something?" she asked.

No.

Too listless to utter just two letters, I responded with silence, but my will had been conveyed nonetheless as I realized when I heard her leaving.

But mom could return. She could return anytime.

Unlike him—

I was in the city. I had gotten fed up with my mom's hourly calls at my door. I wanted her to leave me alone, but it was on such days of all days that she wouldn't let me.

I wasn't in a state to deal with such obstinate approaches that practically screamed "Look, I'm worrying about you!" That said, I couldn't blame someone for worrying about me.

Therefore, I'd escaped.

How can I be so rational...

I was a bit put off by my own behavior.

"Ah..."

I had walked about completely aimlessly and without heading somewhere in special. Despite that, before I knew it, I found myself standing before the fast food restaurant we used to frequent.

My eyes automatically turned to the restaurant's windows where I noticed a high school student sitting at our table, apparently waiting for someone.

"...What's wrong with me?"

For just a moment, that student looked to me like *him*.

But that's impossible.

I turned away to leave. However, I stopped, turned my head around and gazed at the student, just to be carried to the entrance by my feet.

But that's impossible. He can't be there. And I know it. There's no need to confirm.

And yet, I was rushing to the table we would usually sit at.

"Shiga-senpai?"

"Huh? No, you've got the wrong person."

It wasn't his face.

It wasn't his voice.

It wasn't him.

My hopes were denied easily and mercilessly.

I knew it. Better than everyone else. There was no need to confirm.

And yet, a tear escaped from my eye and slid down my cheek.

Dear God,

*If my tears can bring him back, I shall cry until I have no more tears to spill.
So please, give him back to me.*

Taken aback by my suddenly crying, the student hasted away and an employee rushed here to see what was going on. Comforted by that staff member, I left the restaurant.

I know that crying won't solve anything, and tears won't bring anyone back to life.

And still, I had cried like crazy.

Like crazy—that doesn't mean that I really turned crazy. If I had, everything would have been so much easier. For once, I could understand the people who resorted to drugs.

Can't I buy some somewhere around here? Seriously.

I left the main street and entered a back street, but not a soul was there, let alone a drug dealer.

Clearly, I had watched too much TV. On top of that, I had gotten lost because I'd wandered around too aimlessly.

There was no one in the vicinity, and the city noise seemed far somehow. It was as though I had strayed into another world.

Is this the world after death or some world in between? I wish it was.

Here I am thinking such things again...

I decided to enter a small shop nearby to ask the way.

".....?"

I was looking at a blurry ceiling.

But it wasn't the ceiling of my room, nor was it a familiar room in the first place. I pulled away the blanket and sat up. I had a hard time collecting myself, but that had nothing to do with the drowsiness everyone has to fight against right after waking up.,

I left the room and walked around a bit until I came across a large room.

It seemed like I was in a shop.

All kinds of things were lined up in a disorderly fashion on the shelves. There were beautifully crafted glass vases and jars, and silverware, and a framed painting by an unknown artist. There was even a camera that looked very old, although I had no clue of how much value it was. The shelves were filled with things that could show up in a show about antiques. Perhaps, this was really an antique shop.

Why would I enter such a shop...?

But then I recalled that I had intended to ask the shop attendant the way, and at the same time I also noticed that I had no memories after entering.

What happened after I entered this shop?

"You're awake?" a woman in her late twenties asked with a clear voice as she appeared before me.

She was so pretty that I wondered if I were still dreaming. With the gorgeous dress she was wearing, I couldn't help suspecting that she had appeared out of that painting.

"I was really surprised! You just collapsed the moment you entered the shop."

"...Ah," I uttered, finally realizing why there was a gap in my memory, "I-I'm sorry."

"Don't mention it. But more importantly, are you all right? It seems like you haven't gotten much sleep lately?"

"That isn't really the case..."

In fact, I had slept a lot, but no matter how much I did so, my exhaustion didn't seem to go away. Maybe all the energy and will power in my body had drained out already.

"Really? You were groaning in your sleep, you know."

I see, I was groaning. I can't remember anything, but I must have been dreaming of him. What a shame—looks like it wasn't exactly a good dream, but I don't mind as long as I can meet him.

"Ah, um, what kind of shop is this?" I asked impulsively after noticing the shopkeeper's gaze on me.

She didn't seem to mind and answered, "I'm dealing with Relics here."

"Antiques, I take it?"

I already thought my conclusion made perfect sense, but she slowly shook her head.

"I may have said 'Relics,' but I do not refer to antiques and objects of art. 'Relic' is the word we use for magical tools created by mighty ancients or magicians, or for objects that have absorbed a human's grudge or natural spiritual powers.

Surely you have heard of them before. Things like a stone that brings good luck, a voodoo doll, a triple-mirror that shows your death, and so forth."

"Uh-huh..."

She was probably talking about those gadgets in movies. At least, I understood her words like that and was a little surprised that one would call those things Relics, too.

"But let's leave that aside, my dear, how can I help you?"

Since she had even looked after me when I collapsed, I found it hard to tell her that I just wanted to ask for the way. That said, I wasn't wealthy enough to buy expensive antiques.

"I am sorry. There is nothing I want."

Yes. Nothing.

The one thing I want the most will never come back to me.

Except maybe... in my dreams.

Yes. Only in my dreams can I obtain what I want.

But I wouldn't mind. Even if it were just a dream. As long as I could see him again...

"You can make do with a dream?" she asked.

"—Huh?"

It was as though she had read my mind.

No, she hadn't read my mind—there was no need to do that.

A hole must have opened in my heart. A hole so gapingly wide that it was obvious to everyone.

"...I miss him." The insides of my holey heart started to leak. Drop by drop.

"I miss him. I miss him. I want to see him. Even if it's just a dream!"

Be it a dream, be it an illusion, be it a ghost. Whatever it is—I just want to see him.

I want to meet him.

"Are you sure that you are fine with a dream?"

"...Yes."

She replied with a silent nod and took something out of a shelf.

"Take this."

It was a censer as used in aromatherapy. Despite many traces of usage, there was something about it that captivated me.

"Put it next to your bed and light it whenever you sleep. It doesn't matter what type of incense you use."

"?"

"If you do so, your dreams will be under your control," she explained.

"Under my control?"

"Yes," she assured.

I asked the one question that came up right away. With a trembling voice.

"...Can I also see him?"

She nodded silently: "But be careful that you don't lose your grasp on the boundary between dream and reality," she warned me at the end.



"Welcome back," Saki said, but despite the thoughtful tone that showed in her words, I could only give her an empty reply.

I was not in the mood for my usual jokes and rude remarks.



However, I didn't want to spend time alone at home either, and had come to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop even though I had gotten the day off.

I had been at a classmate's funeral that day.

It was a traffic accident. A drunken driver bumped into him and he died almost instantly because his head was hit badly. A horribly quick death somewhere far away from me that wasn't even shown to me as a Vision.

"Are you all right?" Saki finally asked worriedly, but she quickly apologized. Because she felt bad for asking or because she couldn't console me properly?

That said, there was no need for her to be so worried about me.

Of course I was gloomy and in low spirits, but I wasn't *that* sad: I hadn't known the victim so well. Had we not been in the same class, we wouldn't have known each other to begin with. He had been an acquaintance of the level that I would maybe greet in the corridor once we changed classes.

But still we had spent time together.

Sitting in the same classroom, attending the same classes, relaxing during the same breaks, sometimes talking together, sometimes laughing with each other, sometimes getting a scolding together from the teacher.

But the time I could spend with him, which I had taken for granted, had gone lost forever.

I still had to figure out how I was feeling about that.

I was unsure how to express my feelings at the time. I couldn't find appropriate words. In a way, the feeling was similar to learning about a stranger's death on TV.

...Am I sad?

The class was coming to terms with his death.

Step by step, the gloomy mood returned to its former state, we stopped mentioning his name even without having to deliberately avoid it, and the absence of his name, "Shiga," at the morning roll call stopped leaving an off taste.

Without mercy our daily lives went on, changing their shapes and pulling us along even when there was a piece missing.

By no means had Shiga been irrelevant to our class; that's just how life is. Sort of.

"Excuse me," our school janitor said as he entered the classroom.

Our gazes focused on him, and he seemed to know why. Without looking in our direction, the janitor approached a certain desk at the back and dispassionately started carrying it away.

It was Shiga's.

His family had already taken his personal belongings, and we had been told that the desk itself would be removed today. Some felt that we should leave the desk until the next class change, but nobody objected when our class teacher decided that we had better remove the desk and move on. Therefore, nobody complained even while looking at the janitor.

The janitor paused for just a second, unsure as to what to do with the flower on his desk, but he wasn't so stupid as to throw it into the trash, and took the flower away along with the desk.

The flower had been replaced twice after withering but disappeared along with the desk before the third time arrived.

With that, I thought, there will be no empty desk anymore that calls him back into our minds.

As soon as the desk had disappeared, the students returned to their respective breaks. The slightly cheerless air vanished immediately.

"Things move so fast," Shinjou suddenly said, sitting at the desk before me. "Our girl manager, you see, is a friend of Shiga's girlfriend, and according to her she's still not come to school."

I had previously heard from Shinjou that Shiga had dated a junior who was also the manager of his track and field club.

"Well, that must have been a shock for her," I commented.

"I've also had the pleasure of talking with her; she's a very cheerful girl. I hope she gets well soon..." he said.

I hope there will be a day when she can talk about him without pain—just like us.

Although I don't know if that's truly good.

"Jeez, he's gotta be kidding me," I sighed as I looked at my memo, searching for an apartment.

After classes had ended, a teacher had bothered me with an additional task to take care of. Just when I finished, however, I received a call from Shinjou. He asked me to bring him something he had forgotten at school and told me where he was.

Truth be told, I wouldn't normally mind doing him a favor like this, in exchange for a free lunch or something along these lines, but this time, I wasn't happy at all.

I was supposed to bring that item to Shiga's girlfriend's place.

Shinjou had accompanied the girl who managed his team on a visit to Shiga's girlfriend. It's all fine and dandy that he paid her a visit, since they knew each other after all, but was there a need to get me involved?

"Hah..."

After I had notified him of my arrival, Shinjou opened the door.

"I'm sorry, Kurusu!" he said as he made an apologetic gesture with his hand, and grabbed my arm. "Keep me company!"

"What?"

"I don't want to be alone with them!"

"Hey, give me a break!"

Unable to shake him off, I was pulled into the apartment.

Hey, that's got to be a bad joke! I do feel sorry for her, but I definitely don't feel like being around a girl who has just lost her...

"Huh?"

Contrary to my expectations, there was a bright mood in her room.

One of the girls was sitting on her bed in her pajamas, sure, but the two of them seemed to be engrossed in a cheerful chat.

It almost seemed like Shiga's girlfriend had just recovered from a lingering cold, and was now talking away the frustration from being bored.

Suspecting that Shinjou was pulling my leg when he told me this were Shiga's girlfriend, I gave him a look, but he seemed just as confused as me, pulling an awkward smile. By the look of it, the bright mood had surprised him as well. Did that mean that she had already gotten over the loss?

Anyway, I could understand only too well that he would feel out of place, alone with two chatty girls.

Shiga's girlfriend and the other girl noticed me and greeted me with a nod. I returned the greeting.

"This is Kurusu. A classmate of mine."

"I see, thanks for the delivery."

Shiga's girlfriend introduced herself to me as Maya Nanase, and her friend as Sarina Akanuma.

Nanase wore her long black hair in a braid that hung from her right shoulder, giving her a rather mature appearance. She had put a cardigan over her pajamas, but I could still see that she was slenderly built.

Akanuma, on the other hand, had a ponytail that was slightly shifted to the right, and gave off an overall livelier impression than Nanase. Her short height and partly childish appearance made her a cute junior student through and through.

"That's what he forgot? Mind if I take a look?" Nanase asked, pointing at the envelope I was carrying, which was what Shinjou had forgotten at school.

Without giving it a second thought, I handed it to Nanase, who then quickly opened it and took out—a bundle of photos.

I startled at the sight of what was in the first photo and turned my head to Shinjou. Not only he, but also Akanuma, who had appeared cheerful so far, were beholding Nanase with strained faces as well.

Their behavior made perfect sense: besides Shinjou, Nanase and Akanuma, the photo also showed Shiga himself. The four of them were smiling at the camera, striking up poses in front of an animal mascot. They had probably taken these photos during a visit at a amusement park.

Even Shinjou isn't so insensitive as to just show her these—Nanase must have asked him to bring them. Perhaps, he had forgotten them on purpose because he wanted to avoid giving her them.

Ignorant of the three gazes on her, Nanase laughed happily: "Ph! Look at this! Shiga-senpai's face's all twisted!" She looked at Shinjou. "Can I have this one, Shinjou-senpai?"

"Sure. Those are for you, anyway."

"Thank you. But you should really stop using something that ancient instant camera! Why don't you get yourself a digital one? Ah, and once you have one, let's go to a zoo!"

With who?

I had a feeling that Shinjou wanted to ask such a question. In reality, however, he just pulled a slightly awkward face and replied, "Yeah, totally." I couldn't help observing Nanase.

She was obviously acting way too "normal" for a girl who had recently lost her boyfriend in a traffic accident. Neither did she seem like she was pretending to be cheerful, nor had she moved on from the loss; she just seemed normal to the core. If anyone was trying to be cheerful, it was Shinjou and Akanuma.

I even started to have doubts if Nanase had dated Shiga to begin with, but looking at Shinjou's attitude, these doubts were ungrounded.

They say women move on fast from a relationship, but...

"Hey Maya, when are you coming to school again?" Akanuma asked, changing the subject a little forcibly. Maybe she was under the impression that Nanase was straining herself.

"School? Hm... I don't know."

Nanase paused to ponder over the question. While she did look healthy, it was a mental problem she was facing; I guessed that she might be reluctant to go to school where there were bound to be lots of memories with Shiga.

"But I'd lose sleep time that way..." she said, however, to my surprise.

Well, maybe the shock is giving her sleepless nights?

On further inspection, I discovered an opened pack of tablets on the shelf besides her bed. Under normal circumstances, it probably wouldn't even have caught my eye.

Under normal circumstances.

"Maya? Are you taking sleeping pills?"

Akanuma, who had noticed the tablets as well, reached out for the package. She must have had the same disquieting idea as me—suicide by sleeping pills.

Her hand brushed an earthenware bowl that was standing right besides the package; the vessel tipped over and started to roll toward the edge of the shelf.

All of a sudden, Nanase started up from her bed, shoved Akanuma away, and caught it in the last moment.

"Be careful!" she shouted in an intimidating manner that made one doubt that she was the same cheerful girl as before.

"S-Sorry," Akanuma apologized considerately, even though her eyes had widened in surprise.

"Ah, yes. I'm also sorry. This is very dear to me, you know," Nanase apologized as well, having regained her composure. She sat down on her bed again, still holding on to the earthenware vessel, however.

Maybe it was a memento of Shiga.

Because the air had become awkward, I gave Shinjou a look. Guessing correctly what I was trying to say, he sat up and said, "Okay guys, shall we take our leave?"

"See you at school," Akanuma added at the end and left the room with us.

When we left, I could sneak a peek at a relieved Nanase looking at that earthenware bowl.

It was then that a painful noise ran through my head—

I saw a plain, cold room.

Nanase was sleeping there on a bed—or so it seemed.

While there were no irregularities to speak of, it wasn't apparent how this situation came about.

A motionless Nanase lying on a bed was all there was.

The scene was so quiet—so truly quiet—that it could be mistaken for a picture.

That's how quiet her death was.

"So, what do you think?" Shinjou asked me after we had left. Akanuma seemed to be wondering about the same thing.

There was no need to ask what he was referring to; apparently, I wasn't the only one who had felt that something was awry. Being close to her, they must have noticed much more than I, being close to her.

"To be frank, that Nanase doesn't seem like Shiga's girlfriend at all," I replied with my honest thoughts.

Because I hadn't been that personally attached to Shiga, her attitude didn't leave a cold or heartless impression on me, but while I had no idea what was normal for the four of them, Shinjou and Akanuma seemed clearly sadder than Nanase to me.

Shinjou reluctantly opened his mouth, worried about Akanuma who was walking besides him: "I don't know Shiga and Nanase too well, to be honest. I wouldn't have tagged along with them if Akanuma hadn't invited me. In fact, I hadn't even known Nanase before that. But you know... seeing them together just once was enough to tell that they were a happy couple, totally. So, I just..."

"You can't believe that she's so fine?"

"Yeah. Did she look to you like she was acting, Kurusu?"

"Nope."

"Mm..."

"Maya sunk into enormous depression when she heard of Shiga-senpai's death. Like it was the end of the world. Her mom told me that she would shut herself into her room and wouldn't eat anything," Akanuma added. I could clearly recognize that she was confused by Nanase's attitude as well. She had probably asked Shinjou to accompany her because she had been at a loss for words to comfort Nanase.

But against all her worries, Nanase turned out to be acting completely normal.

The shock of seeing that she was alive and kicking even though Akanuma had intended to cheer her up must have thrown her into anxiety.

"But I noticed something weird when Shinjou-senpai left to call you, Kurusu-senpai. I accidentally asked her if she was really okay, and she answered yes," Akanuma explained, thinking back at their conversation, "because she could meet him any time in her dreams, thanks to the censer."

"Censer? That little vessel you almost dropped?" I asked, and she nodded.
"Meet him anytime in her dreams...?"

Can something as vague as that really let people move on so easily? Dreams are just dreams — they're not real. She didn't seem like she had lost her grip on reality, either. She did indeed seem completely normal.

But what secrets were hidden underneath her shell?

I had no idea what had caused the death my 'Vision' had shown me. Was it illness? Natural? Or... suicide?

Never before had I seen a death so calm, a transition from sleep to death so soft.

"Akanuma-san," I said as I gave her something. It was a sleeping pill, which I had *borrowed* when there was a fuss about that censer that almost fell to the

floor. My guess had proved right, unfortunately.

Akanuma gave me a surprised look; not because she thought I were light-fingered, but because I had thought the same thing as her.

"You thought about what she uses these for when you became so jittery, no?"

"Yes..."

"This situation and those pills sure don't make for a good mix..."

"I don't think she uses them for *that*, though."

She *doesn't want* to think so.

"You should absolutely give her family a call and warn them. Just in case, but do it."



After Sarina and the others had left, I decided to use my censer.

I lit some incense and put it into the censer. Any type of incense would do — from joss sticks to coils — but I had taken to using cones.

I had heard that you should actually use powder incense, koh-tadon, gin-you or whatnot for this, but I wasn't too well-versed in this field.

Whatever works.

Neither did I intend to enjoy the fragrance of incense, nor did I want to relax. All I wanted was to fall asleep and meet him.

The smell of citrus spread in my room, and in a matter of seconds, I was overcome by fatigue. I had no idea how many hours I had already slept that day, but whenever I burned incense, I would get sleepy.

I quickly lay down on my bed. The door was locked and my alarm clock not

set — I wouldn't allow anyone to disturb my sleep, to disturb my time with him.

"Maya."

I heard Shiga-senpai's voice. He was waving me in his school uniform, smiling. I quickly walked up to him.

"Did I make you wait?"

"Not at all," he replied.

That's a pity. Not that I was late, but I wanted him to say that he couldn't wait to see me.

"Look, I got this today when I met Sarina and Shinjou-senpai."

Oh? Where did I meet them again? Well, not that important.

I showed him the photos of our trip to the amusement park that I was carrying.

"Ah, from the other day?"

"Yes. Look, your face is all twisted!"

"I'm not photogenic, you know."

Come to think of it, he had said the same thing back then, and in the the photos we took together his face was often contorted. But not once had he refused taking one. He would always listen to my requests, even he was troubled by them.

"What?"

"Mmm, nothing. We also agreed to go to the zoo sometime soon."

"The zoo?"

"Yes."

"But I..." he started, but I interrupted him by pressing a finger against his lips. I wouldn't let him speak any farther. I didn't know what he was about to say, but my gut was telling me to stop him.

"Don't worry," I said without even knowing why I did so.

What is there to worry about, anyway?

"Hey guys!"

Cutting my train of thought, Shinjou-senpai and Sarina showed up, wearing the same clothes as in the photos. For some reason, we were no longer wearing our uniforms, either, and had changed into our casual wear, which we had bought during the date on the holiday after our trip to the amusement park.

"Let's go, senpai!"

No use racking my brains about things I can't understand anyway and spoil our date.

I walked to the other two, pulling him along. After we had assembled, we found ourselves in front of the entrance to a zoo. We entered and strolled around, spotting families and couples here and there.

"Is there something you'd like to see, senpai?" *I'd love to go see the pandas.*

"How about the giraffes?"

Tche... not that I don't like giraffes, but I wanted to see some pandas. I wasn't particularly fixated on pandas; I was just unhappy that our tastes turned out to be different.

"Hm? You don't like giraffes?"

"No, no, that's not true," I said in response to my dense boyfriend's considerate question. "Let's go to the giraffe area."

I quickly started walking toward the giraffe enclosure.

"Ah, what do *you* want to see, Maya?"

"Pandas."

"Then let's head there first."

"You're too late."

He made a disheartened face because of the blunder he had made, blowing my discontent away in a matter of seconds with his gentleness.

I spun round and stucked out my tongue.

"I'm fine if we go there after seeing the giraffes!"

Once I had finished speaking, the entire world around us started shaking.

No!

The moment I thought so, my field of vision zoomed out as if I had a fit of dizziness, and finally blacked out.

My eyes were looking at the ceiling.

My ears were perceiving a knocking at the door.

That noise had jolted me out of my dreams.

From my dreams to reality.

From the ephemeral world where he was, to the real world where he wasn't.

A wave of unbearable disappointment and loneliness rolled over me. I held my arms aloft in front of my eyes, veiling them in darkness — protecting them from reality and distracting myself.

"Maya? Maya? Is everything all right?" I heard my mom from the other side of the door. "Aren't you feeling unwell?"

I was feeling perfectly fine until right now; because of you!

"I'm not. Don't disturb my sleep," I replied.

"Good...," she sighed in relief.

I wondered why she had knocked so stubbornly that day when she would usually just give up if there was no reaction from me.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"Sarina-chan told me to look after you because you didn't seem to be feeling well."

Sarina? Wasn't I completely normal when we talked? Maybe I don't look so healthy compared to when I was attending school because I haven't been outside lately.

But her consideration was uncalled for.

Does even Sarina start disturbing me now?

I was really happy about their visit, but somewhere in my heart, I was hoping that they would leave already. And just when I'd thought I could finally spend some time with *him*, I was pulled back to reality.

I looked at my censer. The incense had already turned into ashes, so I put a new incense cone into it and rolled myself up in my blanket.

Again, I was overcome by sleepiness in no time. That sleepiness, however, would only last until I actually fell asleep, and my sleep would get shallower with every subsequent session.

Even though I didn't want to be in this world.

Even though I wanted to stay in the other world.

Even though I wanted to stay asleep forever.



"Well, that's bound to be a Relic."

The next time I went to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop, I tried asking Towako-san about the censer. When I explained the shape of the vessel to her and told her that Nanase was supposedly able to meet her deceased boyfriend in her dreams, Towako-san estimated that censer to be a Relic, coming to the same conclusion as me.

"What does it do?"

"When you fall asleep while burning incense in that censer, your dreams will be able to control your dreams at will."

"Control your dreams?"

As it turned out, its original purpose wasn't meeting dead people in one's dreams; her wish to meet Shiga must have led to that result.

"She must have wanted to be with her boyfriend, even if it's just a dream," Towako-san said.

Even if it's just a dream...

"The boundary between dream and reality is very vague, after all."

"It is?" I asked in response to her commentary, because I felt that there is a distinct difference between dream and reality.

"A dream is equivalent to reality as long as you don't recognize that it's a dream. You don't always know that you're in a dream when you're dreaming, do you?"

She had a point: While asleep, you are scared in case of a nightmare and happy in case of a nice dream. There's no relief or disappointment until you wake up and realize it was just a dream.

"Does that girl not realize that she's just dreaming?" Saki asked a question

that had been on her mind.

"She should be aware of that, at least while she's awake," Towako-san explained.

That fact was quite obvious, since she had said that she could meet him in her *dreams*.

"However, she might not notice when she's actually dreaming."

Indeed — who would get addicted to that censer if you knew everything was fake while dreaming?

"But in that case, is the guy she's meeting there just a fake?" I asked.

All characters that appear in a dream are but characters contained in that dream; they're obviously not real. If the power of that censer was to control one's dreams, then it shouldn't be able to revive the dead.

"That's a difficult question; when you're dreaming, do you consider everyone to be fake?"

"...No, I probably wouldn't think that."

"There you go. She must be under the impression that he's real while asleep. When she wakes up, however, she will notice that it was but a dream — that he was a 'fake' as you put it."

Regardless of how happy her dreams were, she realized the truth every time she woke up. How could that realization possibly feel? If she was aware that she was just deceiving herself, then she must be feeling literally just empty, right?

Why would she keep doing that?

Did the certainty of being able to meet him in her dreams allow her to endure that feeling of emptiness? Spending happy hours in her dreams, just to experience a great let-down when she woke up, finding hope in the fact that she could meet him again soon, just to fall asleep again.

A vicious cycle like that wouldn't last for long.

Sooner or later, she was bound to notice that there was no point in that.

If so — we could maybe let her sleep for a little longer.

Just a little.

Until she turned into what my 'Vision' had shown me.

A few days after I had visited Nanase, I was about to go home together with Shinjou, who had no club activities that day, when we were stopped by Akanuma.

She was openly crying in front of everyone.

The other students who were preparing themselves to head home gave her curious looks. Shinjou asked her what was wrong, but she only answered with more sobs.

We decided to take her into our classroom for the time being, and after she had calmed down a little, we asked her again. She told us that Nanase wouldn't wake up anymore.

We had to ask her to elaborate, since she was being very vague, after which she gave us a stuttering but better explanation of the situation.

She had gotten a call from Nanase's mother just a few moments ago.

Nanase had fallen asleep and wouldn't wake up anymore, not showing any reaction no matter how many times her mother called her name, no matter how many times her mother shook her.

At first, her mother thought that she was just sleeping deeply, but given that nothing could wake her up, Nanase had to be pretending being asleep. The complete absence of reaction, however, eliminated that possibility.

Disquieted, her mother called a doctor, who couldn't explain the cause of her

sleep, either. In the end, they had decided to wait and see before taking measures because her condition was steady.

"Maybe it's because of the sleeping pills... I didn't, I didn't tell her mom about them when I called her, just that, that Maya seemed to be feeling bad. Maybe, maybe she swallowed a bunch of those pills and..."

Apparently, Akanuma had followed my advise to inform Nanase's mother, but couldn't bring herself to inform her about the sleeping pills. I could see how asking a friend's mother to monitor her daughter in secret of that friend because of a possible suicide attempt was a most disagreeable task. Besides, Akanuma naturally wouldn't want to believe that herself, either.

Charging her with that task was a mistake. I should have done it myself, even if it was none of my business.

"Maya... Maya... I'm so, I'm so sorry...", Akanuma apologized, fiercely sobbing all the while.

"Hey, it's not your fault, Akanuma," Shinjou carefully comforted her, but she kept blaming herself.

"Shinjou's right, Akanuma. The doctor would have noticed if the pills had caused it, right? It must've been something else; probably something on the mental end."

I lied. Not regarding the pills, but regarding the assumption that it was a mental issue.

The problem was rather tangible.

Most likely, that censer — a Relic — was to blame.

I hurried to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop and questioned Towako-san about the Relic again:

"Does that censer keep you asleep?"

"Nope, there's no such effect as far as I know," she denied my fear.

"But the girl isn't waking up anymore. Haven't you heard of some side effect that kicks in after repeated use?"

"I'm afraid no."

Is she going to wake up after a while then?

I couldn't bring myself to believe in such a vague hope. Besides, she had been asleep for more than a day already.

"Is there some kind of duration to the sleep induced by that censer?"

"Once you've fallen asleep, it doesn't matter whether or not the incense keeps burning, and you can be woken up because the sleep itself is completely normal."

Nanase's sleep, however, was lasting.

Exhausted from a series of all-nighters, it may be possible to sleep through the entire day and night. If a girl, who had been sleeping all the time anyway, wasn't waking up despite all efforts, however, that was most certainly abnormal.

There had to be more to it.

"Perhaps she is refusing to wake up?" Saki, who had been listening to our talk, suggested. "It wouldn't surprise me if she wanted to stay there after experiencing the transition from dream to reality over and over."

"You mean she has wished in her dream to stay asleep?"

"Hm, it would make sense that she would stay there in that case, I guess?" Towako-san agreed.

"But how do we get her awake then?" I asked. If only her own will could release her from that spell, we were powerless. It would mean that we had to

wait for her to change her mind.

"Well, there *is* a way, but I'll have to advise you against doing it," Towako-san warned me.

"Could you tell me more?"

"You could enter her dream and persuade her."

"Is that even possible?"

"Yeah, it is. Needless to say, you have to use the Censer to fall asleep, and you have to be touching the person whose dream you want to enter."

"Doesn't sound so bad... But if it's a persuasion task, it might be better to ask one of her parents or friends..."

"No. That's way too dangerous. If someone were to enter her dream without any experience with Relics, they would only get trapped there. To put it in familiar terms, they wouldn't wake up anymore."

Apparently, it wasn't so easy. However, I couldn't just ignore the case.

I recalled Nanase as I had seen her in my vision.

I didn't know if sympathy or the fact that it had been no gaudy death had led me to turn a blind eye to the vision, but I was getting horribly angry with myself for ignoring the cues.

"Are you going to do it?" Towako-san asked me.

"Yes."

"Take care. You'll be the intruder in this case, not the host. That means that *she* will have the upper hand and control over the dream. If worst comes to worst, you won't be coming back anymore. You'll be effectively dead."

Towako-san added one last warning.

"Don't get yourself caught in a dream!"



Today, we went to the zoo again because we'd had to cancel our visit the week before.

...Huh? Why did we cancel it last week? Because of some incident? Rain? Was the zoo closed? But I can remember that we were about to see the pandas...

Oh well.

Shiga-senpai was already there waiting for me, waving his hand with a smile.
"Did I make you wait?"

"Yeah, totally! I was so looking forward to seeing you!" he said to my delight. Good thing that he didn't say the opposite — I was happy that he couldn't wait to see me.

"The others should be here any moment."

About the same time as I suggested so, Shinjou-senpai and Sarina appeared. After we had assembled, we found ourselves in front of the entrance to a zoo. We entered and strolled around, spotting families and couples here and there.

"Is there something you'd like to see, Senpai?" *I'd love to go see the pandas.*

"How about the pandas?"

He wanted to see the same animals as me. I was happy that our tastes turned out to match.

"They should be right over there!" I said, pointing in a direction.

Shortly after we had started walking there, we arrived at the panda enclosure. There were lots of black-and-white bears munching away at bamboo leaves or playing with tires. This sight strongly reminded me of a past visit here,

when I had come with my family. Back in the day, their complete indifference to the onlookers and easiness had made them look like a bunch of sluggards in my eyes.

"They're quite the sluggards, aren't they?" my boyfriend laughed. "...What?"

"Just surprised that we thought the same thing."

The previous time I had been here, my great, childish expectations in the animals had been betrayed, leaving me utterly bored, but having entered high school, I could enjoy the zoo to the fullest.

No, I suppose I could enjoy everything as long as I'm with Shiga-senpai.

"What are you thinking right now?" he asked me.

"How much fun it is to be with you."

I enjoyed seeing the giraffes, just as much as I enjoyed seeing the elephants and the lions.

I was happy just by having Senpai besides me.

If I were to lose him, I would surely despair.

"..."

A tang of sadness crossed my mind for a split-second.

I shouldn't even be thinking about such stupid stuff. There's no way that would happen. There's no way that he would go away.

I shook off those silly thoughts and pulled at his arm. *Look! He's here. He's not going anywhere. If he does, he'll take me with him. We're together forever!*

"Hey, Senpai, where do we go ne—" I said until I noticed someone walking toward us. He stopped right before us. "If I'm not mistaken, you're..."

I have met this person one time before, and that was... huh? Where was that again? I can't remember his name either. But I think I know him.

"Don't remember me? We've met once, but should I introduce myself again? I'm Tokiya Kurusu. One year your senior and in the same class as Shinjou and Shiga."

"...Sorry, but where did we meet again?"

"At your place."

I stared at him in surprise.

Hey, I wouldn't bring an unfamiliar boy home!

Ah, didn't he just say he's in the same class as Senpai? We must have met when I visited his class, then. That's why I can vaguely remember him...

"I tagged along with Shinjou when he visited you to see how you are, remember?"

A visit? For who? For me? But I'm not even sick.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I'm not one of your dream characters," he said.

Dream?

What does he... mean by... that?

Somewhere deep within me, a crack opened, which in turn called forth a certain sensation. Namely, it was the sensation I would get when I realized that I was dreaming.

I was waking.

My head was getting clearer and clearer.

No! another me cried, but the process could not be stopped anymore.

I had realized — that this was just a dream.



Slipping into Nanase's dream wasn't as hard as I'd expected.

Since her parents were desperate and busy to find a good doctor and hospitalized their daughter, it was pretty easy to get alone with Nanase. Moreover, I had used the pretense of retrieving something I had supposedly forgotten at her place in order to get my hands on the Censer.

I had been anxious about what her dreamworld would look like. What awaited me there, however, was a simple zoo surrounded by darkness, much like a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling in the middle of a pitch-black room. Since that was all there was, I didn't have to worry about getting lost.

As I walked toward the zoo, I could recognize Nanase and Shiga, as well as Shinjou and Akanuma. I gathered that they had come here to have a good time together, like they in the photos they'd shown me the other day.

"If I'm not mistaken, you're..." Nanase said when I stood before her.

"Don't remember me? We've met once, but should I introduce myself again? I'm Tokiya Kurusu. One year your senior and in the same class as Shinjou and Shiga."

"...Sorry, but where did we meet again?"

"At your place."

Her gaze drifted off to Shiga.

Well, it's not like we've done anything nasty, right?

"I tagged along with Shinjou when he visited you to see how you are, remember?" I explained, leaving her quite confused.

Looks like she really doesn't remember what happens over in the real world.

"Sorry, but I'm afraid I'm not one of your dream characters."

She strongly reacted to the word *dream*.

From the look of it, she could make various people appear in her dreams

aside from Shiga and herself, but I had definitely not been included in that list.

After all, she had only met me after the tough *truth*. I was no suitable character to appear in one of her happy dreams.

However, the moment she recognized me, she was doomed to accept the fact that this was a dream.

Of course, she could still try to come up with a way to deceive herself, but in order to do so, she would have to use her head, and if she used her head, she would inevitably realize that she was in a dream as well.

You can't keep on dreaming once you've realized it's a dream. It's only a dream as long as you aren't aware of that fact.

"...How did you get here?" she asked me after she had realized everything.

"You're not the only one who can dream with that Censer, you know?"

Her eyes widened. "You know about the Censer?"

"Yeah. Let's you control your dreams if you burn incense with it, no? And to top it off, you can even slip into others' dreams."

"Would you be so kind as to not enter my dreams without my approval?"

She was clearly aware of being asleep, but not waking up just yet.

"Do you even have the faintest idea what's going on outside right now?" I asked, causing her to wrinkle her brow. "You've been asleep for days and won't wake up."

"Several days straight?"

"Yeah. Your parents have taken you to a hospital. They're worried about you. But nobody has been able to get to the bottom of the problem, which is why your parents are looking for skilled doctors now."

"..."

"Akanuma is blaming herself."

"Why...?"

"She's convinced that your taking sleeping pills is the cause, and she knew that you were taking them. Despite that, she bring herself to tell your mother. She didn't try to stop you. And now she's blaming herself."

"But that's not true..."

"Why don't you tell her that directly? In the real world," I said, completely ignoring the dream-generated Akanuma standing right next to Nanase.

"Shinjou and Akanuma are at school right now!"

After I had spoken out, the two of them vanished into thin air.

Most likely, Nanase had become aware of the fact that they shouldn't be here at this time. Their dream existence hadn't been that firm as it seemed.

Her dreamland crumbled with every bit her mind cleared up.

I looked at Shiga. He had positioned himself before Nanase, as if to protect her, and was glaring back at me. He looked like no one else but Shiga. So much so that I would have mistaken him for the real one hadn't I known that this was a dream.

"Wanting him to protect you? Or just thinking that he *would* protect you?" I asked provocatively.

"..."

"Strange: the Shiga I've known was a calm guy who would never pick fights."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Maybe that's not the real Shiga, but only an idealistic image you have of him?"

"That's not true!" she hissed.

"Your every wish may come true in this dreamworld, but none of that is real. It's all fake." I pointed at the animals in the enclosure behind her. "Didn't you know that Pandas have white tails?"

"Eh?"

Nanase swung around to look at the pandas. Their tails were black. With her noticing the mistake in her memory, they turned white in a matter of a split-second.

Truth be told, I had no idea how their tails were colored. I'd only needed her to change something of her own accord.

"Looks like I was right, huh?" I remarked. She turned around to me, scowling at me. "I don't know how you feel, and I think it's up to you if you want to see him in your dreams! But if you have to, why don't you leave it at nightly visits?"

"..."

"You shouldn't be clinging so hard to these dreams that you worry your family and your friends."

"...It's... agonizing," Nanase squeezed out. "It's not like I didn't try to put an end to all this, but I just can't bear it. At the start, I was fine with only being able to see him in my dreams. But every time I wake up and return to reality, I am made realize that he's not here anymore. That's just agonizing."

"And that's why you wished stay asleep?"

She gave me a silent nod.

That was the reason why she wouldn't wake up even though she had recognized this dream as such. In order to end it, I also had to change her mind.

"But don't you feel empty if you know it's just a dream?"

"I do! But *he* is here. I may feel empty, but that's not all: I also feel happy. It's

bliss. Reality, on the other hand, is only crushing. In that case, isn't it better to pick the dream even if it may come to nothing?"

"You seriously don't care if it's all fake?" I asked.

"It's not fake. Everything you see here is real in the context of this dream. As long as I stay ignorant, everything's real. If it weren't for you, it would have stayed that way."

"You're wrong! All you're going to find here is fake. Shiga is no more."

"What are you talking about? That's a lie..."

"It's not."

"If it's not a lie, it's a joke!"

"It's not a joke either."

"So it's just nonsense?"

"Listen, Nanase. Shiga is—"

"Stop it! Stop it! Don't say it!" she cried in denial as she covered her eyes and shook her head, predicting what I was going to say.

She was aware of the effect my words would have.

For a moment, I wavered; much as I didn't want to rub it in, it was necessary in order to jolt her awake.

"Shiga isn't anywhere anymore."

"That's not true. It can't be true! He wouldn't just die—" she stopped abruptly at her own words.

"—Right. Shiga is dead."

"Ah..."

The gruesome fact I had stated erased Shiga like an evanescent phantom — like Shinjou and Akanuma — almost as if reality was trying catch up with

her.

With a distressed "No!" she tried to cling to her gone lover, but unable to touch anything, she fell over.

Shiga had just vanished even from the land of dreams.

I'd deprived her of him; I had her suffer losing Shiga all again.

However, I was sure that this was how it was supposed to be.

"There are people waiting for you in the real world. Let's go back."

Nanase clenched her fists, still kneeling on the bare ground. "... You said that you didn't know how I feel, and you're right. Please don't talk like that if you have no idea of nothing. After all, you would do the same in my place!

Absolutely!"

Nanase raised her head.

Her cheeks were wet with tears, and her piercing eyes locked on me.

"You shouldn't be here. Get out... just, get out!"

——!

I woke up in the hospital room, lying on the ground with my gaze turned at the ceiling.

"Tokiya," a familiar voice said. A moment later, Saki's face appeared in my view, obliterating the ceiling. It was also then that I noticed the soft feel below my head.

"Whoa!" I realized that my head had been placed on her lap and started up.

"W-What? Why are you here?"

"Towako-san told me to have a look because you were taking so long."

According to the clock, it was already past three. I wondered if time had gone

by faster within her dream — which made sense to me because that was my general impression of dreams.

"Ah, right...!" I gasped as I remembered why I was here, and looked at the bed where she was lying. However, she was breathing calmly like before and showed no signs of waking up. I tried shaking her, but it was of no avail.

"Tokiya, let's go before we get into trouble."

While my visit had been authorized, I wasn't exactly keen to stay in the room of a unconscious girl for too long, so I decided that I would attempt to persuade her again another time. Perhaps, I thought, I was supposed to ask Akanuma or one of her other friends for help.

I took the censer and left the hospital together with Saki.

"How did it go?" she asked me on our way back to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

"It was total flop. I thought it'd be enough to make her realize that she's in a dream, but turns out it isn't. We have to make her want to come back voluntarily, but my appeal fell on deaf ears."

"Well, you are a total stranger to her."

"But it looks like she knows that she's just dreaming. Maybe there's no way around having someone close to her do the persuasion after all..."

"But is that really the way to go?" Saki suddenly remarked.

"What do you mean?"

"Is that really going to make her happy?"

"...No one knows. But I for one am on the side of Shinjou, Akanuma and her parents."

"I see."

"Ah," I uttered as I stopped.

"What's wrong?" she asked as she stopped in the middle of a crosswalk.

"This is where Shiga was run over..." *...and passed away.*

A flower vase had been put on his desk for a while after the accident, but there was no trace of that anymore.

"How did he...?" she asked.

"A drunken driver knocked him down when he was traversing this crosswalk."

Although flickering, the pedestrian lights had still been green according to witnesses. He hadn't jumped onto the street — all he did was crossing the road shortly before the light turned red, like pedestrians from all over the world do everyday.

But that had him get overrun.

Right there in the middle of the crosswalk where Saki was standing right now.

"Tokiya, we should get moving."

It was then that a painful noise ran through my head—

The traffic lights started to flicker.

A car was coming straight toward us.

I got on the crosswalk and Saki proceeded a few steps.

The car was drawing closer even though the lights were still red.

Its driver didn't stop, he wasn't even slowing down.

The car came rushing toward us and — hit the crosswalk.

Saki was right there.

Saki was right in the middle of the crosswalk.

Saki was crossing the road on the green light, like pedestrians from all over the world do everyday.

—Her body was thrown into the air like a rag doll.

The Tsukumodo Antique Shop was as calm as always, cloaked in silence and completely lacking liveliness.

There was not a single customer.

There was not a single smile.

I was the only one at the shop.

But that wasn't surprising: the shop was closed.

"Tokiya," I heard someone say and raised my head.

Towako-san had entered without my knowing. She was clad in a traditional black dress and had her hair tied up. *How rare*, I thought, just to notice that I was wearing a black suit as well.

It was really weird for us to be all black at the same time. No, what was *really* weird was the absence of one more girl who had a preference for the color black.

"Towako-san, do you know where Saki is?" I asked like a complete moron.

"Tokiya..."

"Ah, she's gone shopping, right? She should be back in an hour, then. Shall I open the shop for the time being? Yeah, well, not that we'd get any customers."

"Tokiya."

"I mean, she really loves this shop, just as much as she loves customer

service and all that stuff, doesn't she? Always thinking about how she can boost our sales, always completely missing the mark... but she's doing all that because she loves this shop so much, so she might not come back if we don't open it, right?"

"Tokiya!" Towako-san yelled as she slapped my face. "Get a grip. Saki-chan isn't coming back."

"..." I averted my eyes and took a step toward the door to set up the shop.

However, Towako-san grabbed my arm and pulled me back. With a grip much tighter than expected — so much that it hurt.

She locked my head to look straight at me. With eyes much more serious than expected — so much that it hurt.

Stop it.

Stop it.

Towako-san, please don't say it.

I know; so please don't say it.

Because if you keep silent, I can keep pretending not to know.

So please don't say it—

"Saki-chan is dead."

The cruel truth caught up with me.

Yes, the word *truth* had popped up in my head and clicked into place. I tore it out again, however, and tossed it away.

"What are you talking about? You shouldn't be lying about something like..."

"It's not a lie."

"It must be a joke then!"

"It's not a joke, either."

"So it's nonsense?"

"Tokiya! Saki-chan is—"

"No!" I cut her short.

That's not true.

It can't be true.

—*she can't be dead.*

I closed my eyes and turned my head away.

How stupid of me.

I shouldn't have closed my eyes, because I saw Saki on the back of my eyelids.

She flew through the air like a rag doll and slammed against the ground at full tilt, her limbs twisted like those of a broken dummy after a crash.

But the red pool that spread around her motionless body proved that she wasn't a dummy.

No matter how much I cried, no matter how much I shook her, she wouldn't move a bit.

Her death was immediate.

Saki flew through the air and fell hard to the ground, and was already dead by the time I reached her. Her death was caused by a strong blow on the head, either when she was hit by the car, or when she fell to the ground. The doctor said that she had probably not even realized what happened.

And I was still unable to accept it.

Saki had died.

While the words made perfect sense to me, my mind and my heart failed to process them.

It had been way too abrupt.

I could understand that something like this would happen to people unrelated to me elsewhere. That's life. But not to Saki; Saki was a girl related and dear to me, who I was supposed to spend much more time together.

And yet, Saki had died in front of my eyes. Right in front of my eyes, just like the Vision I had seen—

Wait.

Isn't this still a future scene shown to me by my Vision?

"Right. I'm just having a vision!"

"Tokiya..."

Exactly, I got it!

I'm looking at the future through my Vision.

That means I can still change the outcome.

I am going to change the future.

"Quick, I have to wake up."

Otherwise, I won't make it in time.

It happens on the way home from the hospital.

On the crosswalk.

That's where Saki gets run over.

I have to stop it.

Be it by staying away from the hospital in the first place.

Be it by not crossing the street there.

Be it by jumping at the car in her place.

I have to change the future no matter what.

"That's weird. Why is this Vision so long? Take me back already. I've seen enough. Time's running out!"

I knocked on my head. I punched against my head. But I didn't awake from my Vision.

"Come on! Wake up already! Quick!"

This is a Vision.

And I'm going to save her from her death.

That's the obvious flow of things.

It should be.

I knocked my head against the wall. I tore my hair. But I didn't awake. I couldn't.

"Wake up!"

Why does this Vision keep going? It's almost as though — it were reality.

"Wake up... already...!"

"Tokiya, it's enough," Towako-san said as she put her hand on my shoulder.

Warmth.

It was a warmth that did not exist in the pictures my Visions would show me.

"But that's not possible, is it? That's just so freaking absurd! She wouldn't die in front of my eyes. It's the same thing like always: I have a Vision of her death, and then I save her. That's the only way things add up!"

"It's not," she countered calmly, averting her eyes from me. Her voice was so calm that I cooled down a bit.

I would have been able to lose my composure had she yelled at me; why did she have to treat me so maturely when it didn't even suit her?

This way, you leave me no other choice but to admit the truth...

"Tokiya. Do you know what this is?" she asked as she showed me something.

It was the Censer Relic.

"With this you can meet Saki anytime. Only in your dreams, though."

"Ah..."

"But there will be no return once you've used it. You will stay asleep."

"Eh?"

"Remember the girl who used this? The Censer grew too strong when she drowned in it."

A censer that gives you absolute control over your dreams.

One that enables you to meet even the dead in your dreams.

But one that forces you to abandon reality by choosing it.

"I won't stop you. The choice is yours," she assured me with a bitter smile and held out the Relic. "Take it if you will. Otherwise, I'll destroy it for good right here, right now."

If I took it, I would have to part with Towako-san, my friend and my family. But if I didn't, I would have to part with Saki.

What am I supposed to do?

Which one am I supposed to pick?

In this world, I can't meet Saki.

In the other world, I can't meet everyone else.

I'm lacking something either way. I have to let go of one of those two.

"But I..."

I can't make such a choice. But I have to. I have to make a choice that can't be made.

"I... I..."

"Consider this well. Imagine as well as you can the world of your choice."

I imagined to myself the real world.

Like I always do, I go to school and show up at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop afterwards. I'm here, Towako-san's here, but there's no Saki. There's no sighing at her ridiculous "customer service" anymore, no pointless arguments, no reading what she is thinking behind her deadpan facade.

I imagined to myself the dream world.

I spend time together with Saki. But I am alone with my self-conceived Saki — neither my friends, nor Towako-san are here... not here? Really? I can design this world like I want. I'll just have to place them here as well.

And create a world with Towako-san, my friends, my family and Saki.

I reached out for the Censer — and stopped.

Are you sure? Are you really sure? Can you live with such an illusory world?

It was then that I remembered something Towako-san had once said to me.

A dream is equivalent to reality as long as you don't recognize that it's a dream.

It would be real for as long as I kept deceiving myself.

Fake would turn into truth.

Why shouldn't I go for the dream world then?

Saki wasn't here. That was an undeniable fact and set in stone. Could put up with that? Could I come to terms with that? With a world without Saki? With a world that is missing something elementary to me?

However, in the other world I could have everything. Towako-san, my friends, my family, and of course Saki were there and waiting for me.

Towako-san had said that there would be no return; if I didn't have to fear waking up, I didn't have to fear recognizing the dream. I could remain in the belief that it was reality.

The dream would break free from the boundaries of a dream.

I could create the ideal reality.

"I..."

Towako-san hated to see people obtain Relics.

"I..."

Because she had seen many ruin themselves with them.

"I..."

Therefore, she tried to collect them herself and lock them away.

Despite that, she had given me the chance to choose.

She was going against her principles for my sake.

She was willing to see me off with a smile as I plunged into my sweet ruin.

"Farewell."

"Yes."

I took the Censer she held out to me.

I regained consciousness and was standing before Nanase.

I felt a peculiar sensation, similar to the feeling when waking up.

"A dream?"

"Yes. I have shown you a dream with my powers in this world, so that you can share my pain," she explained as she stood in front of me, and then she looked down at me as I was kneeling on the ground. "But I don't know what you have dreamed of. Nor do I know which one you chose."

We had felt the same pain — and we had been confronted with the same choice.

Nanase had forced me to choose between the Censer's fake reality or the unalterable truth by sending me into a dream and making me lose a close person.

"Don't get yourself caught in a dream!"

The warning Towako-san had given me suddenly crossed my mind.

"Which did you choose?" Nanase asked calmly.

"...the Censer."

I didn't even try to lie.

Nanase was closely and wordlessly gazing at me. I returned a look only once, but unable to hold her gaze, I averted my eyes.

"I would like to thank you for all your efforts, but I'm not going back."

"..."

I decided that I was in no position to disagree with her and struggled to get back on my feet.

"Could you apologize in my place to my... no, never mind. I have to suffer

the consequences of abandoning them. Besides, you're the wrong person for such a task," she laughed bitterly and continued with a request: "May I ask you to dispose of that Censer and make sure that I'll have been the last fool to abuse it?"

Shiga was standing next to Nanase again.

Before I could nod, the two of them were already far away from me. She was erasing any reminder of reality and returning to sleep once more.

She hadn't gone crazy.

She hadn't lost control over herself.

She hadn't been blinded by greed.

She had deliberately chosen the path to ruin after thoroughly considering the consequences.

In that case, my hands were tied: neither did I have any words for her, nor did I have the right to say them. If there was anything I could do, then it was to offer my sympathies to her for her bad luck.

Suddenly, I was overcome by the sensation of waking up.

The world around me became deformed, turned black and eventually left me in a veil of absolute darkness. There, I thought back Nanase's final expression after learning that we had made the same choice.

In her eyes I did not find any hatred against me for tormenting her with Shiga's death all again, nor did I find any ridicule for choosing the same path despite my know-it-all attitude.

All there was was envy.

Strong envy of me and the relief I had been granted unlike her—



I know that it's just a dream, but I don't care; a world without him is much less worth to me than even a dream.

Until realization sets in, I keep wallowing in dreams.

Once realization sets in, I return into my dreams.

That's the dumb cycle I keep tracing.

Perhaps, there will be a day when I can no longer endure the emptiness of this place and return to reality.

But for now — until I can handle the cruelty of reality — I want to indulge myself in the cozy world of dreams.

I'm sorry everyone.

I won't forget you.

I will be together with you in this world.

So please forgive my selfishness.



With a heavy heart, I headed back and arrived in front of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

It was a dream, I thought, I'm sure that it was just a dream.

And yet, I was riddled with anxiety because the dream had been so real.

Had it really just been a dream? What was waiting for me on the other side of this door? Would she be there?

I opened the door to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop—

Like always, I was greeted by the store doorbell.

Like always, I was greeted by the silent shop.

And—



Like always, I was greeted by a deadpan face.

"Welcome back, Tokiya."

Saki was there.

Before I knew it, I was rushing toward her and embraced her. I pressed her against me without even wasting any thoughts on her delicate physique.

Nanase's envious face appeared on my closed eyelids, but I wasn't going to trade with her. There was no way in hell I'd do that even if I could; forget it!

I maintained the embrace, waiting for the horrible anxiety that was riddling me to be pacified, and feeling her reassuring warmth, while Saki was letting me have my way. She just stood there like always with the usual lack of expression.

Towako-san was watching me with a confused look, but as banal as it may appear to others, I had rarely been so thankful of anything before.

From the bottom of my heart, I thought:

Thank god it was just a dream.

Sleeping Beauty

At the end of the day, I'm just a high school student.

It may look like I'm always working on some Relic-related incidents, but that's not true.

I do read manga and I do play video games just like anyone else, although I hardly ever buy any because I'm broke. And of course, I hang around with my friend after school when I'm not on shift, and I engage in silly chats during breaks. I'm happy when I get a good mark, and I'm depressed when I get a bad one. Not only do I join my buddies to some karaoke occasionally, I've also played billiard and dart and whatnot with them. And while I haven't had the opportunity yet, I'm also interested in skiing and snowboarding.

I could go on like that, but the point is that I do the same things and have the same interests as any high school student.

Anyway, what I'm really getting at here is... well, I'm not generally uninterested in, um, romance.

So it shouldn't be surprising that I would be a bit sensitive to this kind of thing, right?



When I woke up, I realized that Tokiya had pushed me down. No, "pushed down" might be an inaccurate expression, because I must have already been asleep and lying by the time it happened.

In that case, what should I label this situation?

His right cheek was softly pressed against mine, his left hand placed on my right, his right leg between my legs, and his body was on mine.

Should I say that he was holding me down? Let's make another quick check...

His right cheek was softly pressed against mine, his left hand placed on my right, his right leg between my legs, and his body was on mine.

Yes, "to hold down" should fit quite nicely. *But wait*, I thought. He wasn't moving.

"Tokiya?" I called his name, but there was no response. He seemed to be sleeping and was breathing calmly.

Someone who's asleep can hardly hold you down, so this expression might be inaccurate as well. But what should I call this, then? Our bodies were entwined?

Something still feels off. Wasn't there a simple and straightforward expression for this kind of situation? For example—

We were cuddling.

"Cudd...!" I uttered unwittingly in surprise at my own thoughts.

Tokiya and I were cuddl... no, our bodies were entwi... no, he was holding me dow... anyway, we were in that specific situation.

At 08:00 in the evening, in the living room, alone.

At 08:00 in the evening...?

I looked at the clock once again, but the display did read "PM" indeed.

The fact that Tokiya and I were cuddl... no, our bodies were entwi... no, he was holding me dow... anyway, the fact that we were in that specific situation confused me a lot already, but the time was just as startling.

I couldn't remember taking an afternoon nap.

I wondered if I had passed out, but I was unable to confirm that; there was a gap in my memory. Calming myself down, I started tracing my memory.

I had stood up in the morning, changed into my clothes and prepared breakfast. After that, I went to wake up Towako-san, but I was told not to because her latest investigations had reversed her circadian rhythm, which is why I then had breakfast alone. And then...

Right. I noticed that the trash bin was full. Therefore, I filled the trash into a bag.

That's where my memory cut off.

I had been taking breakfast, so it should have been about 08:00 AM.

I looked once more at the clock. It was eight o'clock in the evening. I managed to move my head—I accidentally rubbed my cheek against Tokiya's when I did so, but I tried not to think about it—and took a look out of the window. As expected, it was dark outside; this eliminated the possibility

of the clock displaying the wrong time period.



Had I fallen asleep while putting the trash out? Twelve hours even?

This is weird. What's going on...?

I couldn't believe that I had fallen asleep while I was filling a trash bag. Something must have happened then—

"Mhn!" A strange utter escaped my lips as Tokiya's tickling breath found its way into my ear. I hurriedly closed my mouth.

I hope he didn't hear that.

Now that I thought about it, Tokiya and I were cuddl... no, our bodies were entwi... no, he was holding me dow... anyway, we were in that specific situation. On top of that, Tokiya had already been asleep when I'd woken up.

In other words, we had been sleeping together like this.

...But how and why did we end up in this position?

Suddenly, my awareness of the situation jumped up. Not as words, but by feeling his touch and his warmth, I grew aware that his face, his hand, and his body were pressed against mine.

"A-At any rate, I should wake him up."

I tried to push him away from below, but he turned out to be heavier than expected. That reminded me that I'd once read somewhere that sleeping kids were heavy.

Because his position had changed in the process, however, Tokiya started to shift about and, even worse, intertwined the

fingers of his right hand with those of my left hand.

It was as though we were holding hands.

"T-Tokiya."

I didn't care about why I had been asleep for twelve hours anymore; this situation was far more urgent.

Anyways, I have to push him away.

However, neither did Tokiya move away, nor could I move him away.

Please, Towako-san, come down here. The moment I thought so, my savior came down the stairs.

"Saki-chaaan, I'm hungry! Is dinner ready?"

"Ah, Towako-san, you've come just at the right moment..." I said, asking for help with my problem—

"Sorry for disturbing!"

But my request was ignored; Towako-san made an about-turn and went back up the stairs.

Huh? Why would she just go away? Huh? Disturbing? What did she mean by "disturbing"?

For once, I shouted at the top of my lungs: "Y-You, you've got the wrong idea!"

After I had somehow managed to stop her, I explained the situation to her and had her move Tokiya away.

"What should I say—that was a surprise! Sure didn't expect to find you two making love!"

"That's a misunderstanding."

She had clearly used a false expression.

I moved my gaze from Towako-san to Tokiya. He was still asleep and wouldn't wake up no matter how much we shook and hit him. *Is he that tired?*

"By the way, do you happen to know what I've been doing today? I don't remember anything between eight in the morning until now. It seems like I was sleeping, though..."

"Eight in the morning? About the time when you came to wake me up?" Towako-san asked back.

"Yes. The last thing I remember doing is having breakfast and trying to bring out the trash."

"Hm... I also got up just now, you see. Can't help you with that."

"You've been asleep for more than twelve hours?"

"Well, that's an all-nighter for you. The day was over by the time I got out of my bed," Towako-san explained as she tilted her head left and right, cracking her shoulders. Apparently, she was still exhausted. Thinking like that, it might not be that strange that we would sleep for so long, either.

I suppose it's possible to fall asleep for half a day because of exhaustion...?

"Speaking of which, what are you investigating?" I asked.

"Ah, a few things about that Censer."

She was referring to the Relic Tokiya had brought, which

allowed anyone who fell asleep while burning incense with it to control their dreams. He received the censer from a girl in his school who had fallen victim to it and decided to entrust Towako-san with it.

"More importantly, I'm hungry."

"Ah, yes. I'll prepare dinner right away. Just let me tidy away the trash before that..."

Because I'd suddenly fallen asleep, the trash bin was turned over and its contents were scattered about on the floor. I didn't have time to bring out the trash, but I wanted to stuff it into a bag at least.

"Oh, I'll take care of that. Into the kitchen with you!" To my surprise, Towako-san offered to help with the housework for once. I gathered that she was starving, not having eaten anything all day.

"Okay, can I ask you to fill the bag, then?"

"Sure!" she replied as she walked toward the trash bin—
Her face suddenly turned stern.

"Towako-san?"

She ran her finger across the floor and scowled at it.

"What's the matter?" I asked, and noticed on a closer look that her finger was covered with dust. "Should I wipe off the dust?"

"It's ashes."

"Ashes?"

"I remember now. Yesterday, Tokiya threw away the remaining ashes inside the Censer into the trash bin." Towako-san dusted off her finger. "You fell asleep when you were emptying this trash bin, correct?"

"Um, yes."

"Didn't that whirl up some ashes?"

"Now that you mention it..."

I remembered being bothered by the dust that was raised when I moved the contents into the bag. Right after that, I suddenly became sleepy—

"Tokiya! Wake up!" Towako-san yelled as she gave him a shake. However, Tokiya showed no signs of waking up. She proceeded to examining his hands; his fingers were covered by ashes like hers. "Maybe there's some side effect to the ashes of that censer. Keep an eye on Tokiya; I'm looking into the matter," she said and went back upstairs.

I gazed after her. I had to leave this matter to her.

While putting a blanket over Tokiya, I pondered over what I should do after that, since I was well rested. I also felt uncomfortable because I hadn't kept the shop that day.

Does this mark the start of the Tsukumodo Antique Shop late night opening?

Suddenly, Tokiya turned over, pushing away the blanket. When I reached out to adjust the blanket for him, he also tried to do the same in his sleep and accidentally grabbed my hand.

I almost pulled my hand back, but I reconsidered.

His hand was bigger than I'd thought; surprisingly hard skin and big fingers made his hand appear very masculine.

I recalled the touch of our intertwined fingers, the weight of his body, his warmth.

Noticing how my face was heating up, I put my hand on my cheek to cool down a bit. Because the feel of Tokiya's hand was still fresh, however, it felt as though *his* hand was stroking my cheek.

I immediately shake off those strange thoughts by physically shaking my head.

I had been a bit strange ever since that day—by "that day" I mean the day when Tokiya went to the rescue of that girl who had fallen victim to the censer—ever since Tokiya had done a certain thing to me.

However, in a sense, I also thought that there was nothing strange about that.

It may look like I'm always working on some Relic-related incidents or caring about our sales, but that's not true.

At the end of the day, I'm just a teenager girl.

I do have them, too — those moments when you get conscious of the other sex.



I was lying around alone when I woke up.

Well, I always sleep alone, so that was completely normal. What wasn't quite as normal was the fact that I had been sleeping in the living room at the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

Why didn't I sleep at home? I thought and tried to trace my memories of the previous day.

Right! When I'd come to work in the evening, I'd come across a shocking scene.

The shop was closed.

While you wouldn't find any customers at any time throughout the year, you could be sure that the Tsukumodo Antique Shop wasn't closed on any day in the week, unless there were special circumstances. And I hadn't heard of any.

I entered the shop through the back door and discovered Saki collapsed on the floor in the living room. Her condition and that of the shop immediately linked in my head.

Has she been lying there since before the opening time?

Keeping my blood from running cold with all my might, I rushed into the room and raised her upper body—

Saki was sleeping leisurely; with the usual lack of expression in her face and no sign of pain.

Suddenly, a possible explanation crossed my mind: Towako-san had been investigating the censer I'd brought her the other day; Saki must have been assisting her until late at night.

After I'd let out a deep sigh, I put a blanket over Saki and reluctantly opened the shop.

Before I knew it, it was closing time. Wanting to take my leave, I tried to wake Saki up, but no matter how much I shook and nudged her, she wouldn't

open her eyes.

Slowly but surely getting suspicious, I took a look around because I feared that there was a relation to yet another Relic. However, there was nothing special to catch the eye, except maybe for the trash bin which was turned over.

When I grabbed the bin to raise it, I noticed that my hand had gotten dirty. Analyzing the touch and the smell, I found out that it was ashes—the ashes I had thrown away the other day that had been inside the censer.

The censer gave its users absolute control over their dreams, and, more importantly, the incense burnt with it was very sleep-inducing—

I realized that Saki's deep sleep must have been caused by the censer or its ashes.

But that realization had come too late.

I had probably breathed in some when I smelled on the ashes; I was suddenly assaulted by an overwhelming wave of sleepiness I could hardly resist.

During the last moments of consciousness, I had tried to shake Saki awake—
But my thread of consciousness had been cut before I succeeded.

Most likely, I've been sound asleep after that, I thought after ending my flashback.

The clock revealed to me that it was shortly after eight in the morning, which would mean that I had slept for about twelve hours.

"Where's Saki?" I muttered, unable to make out Saki, who had been sleeping here as well.

Wanting to take a look into her room, I went to the stairs, just to run into Towako-san who was coming downstairs carrying an energy drink in one hand.

"Oh, woken up?"

"Towako-san, I was..." She signaled me to stop before I could finish.

"You were charmed to sleep by that censer, no?"

I was an open book to Towako-san, as it seemed.

"Is Saki okay?" I asked.

"I've just taken a look into her room. She's sound asleep."

"All day and night?"

"No, she was awake during the night."

"I see..." Saki had been awake while I was asleep. "Because of the censer, I suppose?"

"To be exact, it's because of the incense burnt with it. Probably some kind of side effect. Give me some more time to find out the details."

"Got it."

"How are you feeling?" Towako-san asked me.

"Normal. In fact, I feel pretty well rested."

"Doesn't surprise me, seeing that you've had a good twelve hours rest. So, what are you going to do?"

"Hm?"

"Classes are starting."

"Shit, I'm late!"

Seems like I had been still half-asleep; cruel reality blew away the cobwebs.

"Drop me a message during each break. Just in case you fall asleep at school."

"Okay, see you!" I replied as I dashed outside. *Sure got myself into some*

trouble again, I thought while I was running to school.

Yes, at the time, I had no idea how severe this incident truly was.



The situation became a bit clearer after a few days.

For one thing, we learned that the ashes of the Censer came with a sleep-inducing side-effect whose sleep could not be interrupted. For another thing, that sleep would always set in at a certain time of the day and last for exactly 12 hours.

In other words, I was asleep from 8 AM until 8 PM and awake from 8 PM until 8 AM. Tokiya, on the other hand, was asleep from 8 PM until 8 AM and awake from 8 AM until 8 PM, meaning that he was asleep just when I was awake and vice versa.

Tokiya could still consider himself happy: He was awake when he had to attend classes and keep the shop. The only real downside he had to deal with was a slightly increased sleep length.

However, I was different. I couldn't work.

I would wake up just when the shop closed and fall asleep when the shop opened its doors. I was upset; I'd even asked Towako-san to provisionally extend the opening time, but in the end, there were no customers at so late an hour.

Of course, I didn't just sit back and do nothing: I tried everything that I could to attract customers nonetheless,

starting off by reading "SPECIAL ISSUE: Behind The Scenes - Night Clubs" and "Becoming A Queen Of The Night Made Easy." However, these books were of no use for the Tsukumodo Antique Shop.

To begin with, I wasn't allowed to drink alcohol yet, nor was I a queen.

Once, I followed the advice given in "How To Snatch Customers Off The Street At Night" and tried approaching someone on the main street saying "Hey boss, fancy to take a look at one of our hot antiques?" but that person was not an executive. Unfortunately, I don't have the ability to recognize superiors at a glance, and most of all, there were no people that late at night that looked like they would be leading a team.

Anyway.

Being unable to serve any customers had left me stressed and made me realize once again that I'd been born for customer service. I hadn't expected that not being able to work would be so agonizing.

Besides—

I hadn't met Tokiya for days. Not in an awake state, at least...

Somehow I don't like this.

I looked at Tokiya who was lying next to me, sound asleep.

We had decided that Tokiya would be staying here for a while

because it was dangerous if he suddenly fell asleep at home when he was alone. We weren't absolutely sure of the sleep cycles yet.

*Just bear up with it a little longer, Saki, I told myself,
Towako-san is searching for a solution.*

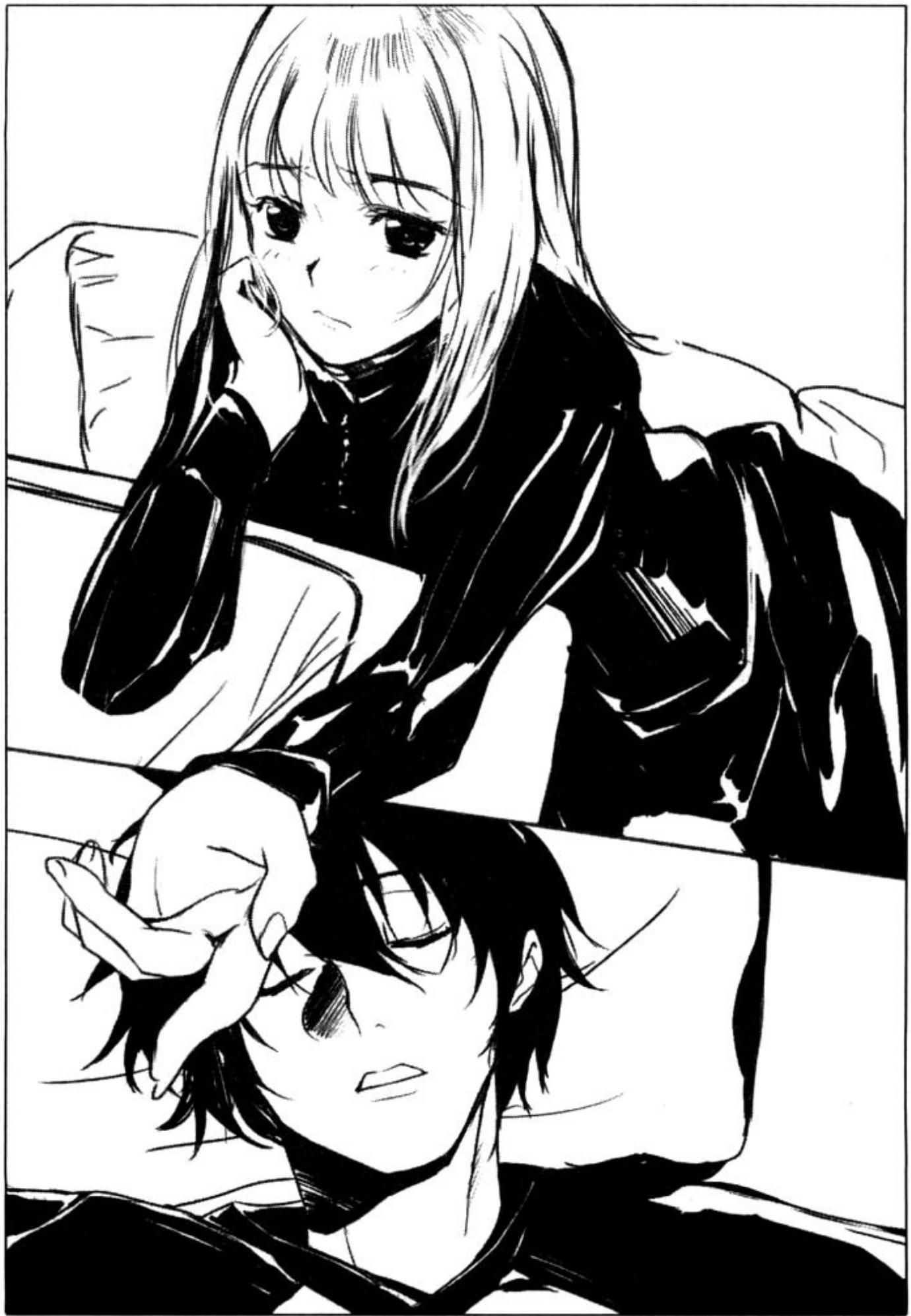
"Hah..." I sighed as I poked his nose with my finger.

You could at least make an effort to stay awake once in a while!



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In other words, I was asleep from 8 PM until 8 AM and awake from 8 AM until 8 PM. Saki, on the other hand, was asleep from 8 AM until 8 PM and awake from 8 PM until 8 AM, meaning that she was asleep just when I was awake and vice versa.

Saki could still consider herself happy: She had a proper excuse to sleep through her shift and was free to do whatever she wanted at night. Well, I didn't know if there was anything she would want to do, though.

However, I was different. I had to go to school *and* to work.

Even though I could've called in sick if only my sleep cycle would set in during school, I would always wake up at 8 sharp, which was, to top things off, just in time to barely make it to school somehow. Every morning I had to get up in a hurry and run there at full speed. The evenings weren't any better, since work was calling, leaving me with not a single free minute before getting sleepy. Moreover, I had trouble following my buddies at school when they talked about the TV shows they had watched the day before for obvious reasons.

Anyway.

Having no free time for myself had left me stressed and made me realize again how much I loved my liberties. I hadn't expected that spending all time for school, work, and school would be so agonizing.

Besides—

I hadn't met Saki for days. Not in an awake state, at least...

Somehow I don't like this.

I looked at Saki who was lying next to me, sound asleep.

We had decided that Saki would be sleeping in the living room for a while because it was dangerous if she suddenly fell asleep while using the stairs. We weren't absolutely sure of the sleep cycles yet.

You won't have to endure this much longer, I told myself, Towako-san is searching for a solution.

"Hah..." I sighed as I poked Saki's cheeks with my finger.

Geez, try to stay awake once in a while!



After long, Towako-san finally discovered a way to break the sleeping spell that lay on us:

"A kiss will do."

That's what she said.

"....."

"....."

"You want me to try to hit him and fail," I said.

"That'd be a *miss*."

"You want us to become happy."

"You're looking for *bliss*."

"That language."

"That'd be Swiss."

"Nothing. Just *bup*—"

"—*kis*."

"Sounds about right, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. I'm talking about a smooch, a lip smack," Towako-san repeated.

"An illicitly distilled alcoholic liquor, and a watchmaking brand dedicated solely to children."

"Hooch and Flik Flak. You know some quite obscure stuff, don't you? ...I can see that you're flustered, but please stop with those silly jokes. You're not that type of character."

Yes, it's not typical of me to be so flustered.

However, there was no way I could keep a cool head after hearing something like that. They may say that I have no feelings or that I don't show them, but the odds are that my confusion did show this specific time.

"Well, the only thing that can awake Snow White from her sleep is the Prince's kiss," Towako-san explained.

"That scene was an addition of the movie and does not exist in the original tale by the Grimm Brothers."

"I don't care. The point is that the same thing happened in the past and was solved that way. So come on, get on with it!"

"Y-You can talk..."

"Hey, it's just a kiss—you're past that stage, aren't you?"

"We're not!"

"Even though you were squeezing each other in my shop the other day?"

"But that's because Tokiya...!" *Because he suddenly hugged me...*

Towako-san had been teasing me with that for days.

"Well, I guess it's a bit embarrassing if I'm watching, no? I'm waiting over there."

"No, but..."

I looked at Tokiya—at his lips. My eyes were drawn to that one point.

I felt a blush spread over my cheeks.

That's not typical of me at all.

Recollecting myself, I raised my head, just to find Towako-san broadly grinning at me.

"I-I'm not going to do it," I declared.

"But the spell won't break if you don't."

"But..."

Towako-san held her hand against her mouth and, with an amused smile resembling that of a child who had just received a new toy, she said: "Well, then you'll just have to wait for Tokiya do it for you."



After long, Towako-san finally discovered a way to break the sleeping spell that lay on us:

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That's what she said.

"....."

"....."

"You want me to try to hit her and fail," I said.

"That'd be a *miss*."

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"You're looking for *bliss*."

"That language."

"That'd be Swiss."

"Nothing. Just *bup*—"

"—*kis*."

"Sounds about right, doesn't it?"

"No, it doesn't. I'm talking about a smooch, a lip smack," Towako-san repeated."

"An illicitly distilled..."

"I've already heard that!"

She beat me, but that didn't help me to cool down. There was no way in hell I could stomach an order like that without getting all flustered, no matter how cool-headed and reasonable I always was.

"Who did you just call reasonable and cool-headed?"

"No remarks on monologues, please," I requested.

"You were speaking aloud."

Oh, really? See? I'm so shaken that I can't even hold my monologues in!

"Well, the only thing that can awake Snow White from her sleep is the Prince's kiss," Towako-san explained.

"That was just an addition of the movie, and..."

"I've already hear that as well. Saki-chan did that one."

Oh! She must have also been quite bamboozled if she really gave the same replies as me!

"Anyway, there was a case like this in the past and it was solved like that, so go ahead and give it a try. Can't hurt, can it? Come on, get on with it!"

"Y-You can talk..."

"But you two are past your first kiss, aren't you? Saki-chan wouldn't tell me, though."

"We're not!"

"Even though you were squeezing each other in my shop the other day?"

"But that's because Saki...!" Because I was shown a dream where she died, so I overreacted a tiny bit when I confirmed that she was safe and sound...

But Towako-san had been teasing me with that for days.

"Well, I guess it's a bit embarrassing if I'm watching, no? I'm waiting over there."

"No, but..."

I looked at Saki who was sleeping in the living room—at her lips. My eyes were drawn to that one point.

I felt a blush spread over my cheeks.

That's not typical of me at all.

Recollecting myself, I raised my head, just to find Towako-san broadly grinning at me.

"I-I'm not going to do it," I declared.

"But the spell won't break if you don't."

"But..."

Towako-san held her hand against her mouth and, with an amused smile resembling that of a child who had just received a new toy, she said: "Well, time to man up then."



It was 8 PM sharp when I woke up.

Next to me lay a sleeping Tokiya, who must have fallen asleep just now.

That meant that the spell hadn't been broken yet—in other words, that he hadn't kissed me.

I found myself being half-relieved and half-disappointed... R-Relieved because Tokiya didn't turn out to be a frivolous player who would do something like that without hesitating, and d-disappointed not because he didn't kiss me, of course, but because the curse hadn't been broken...!

A-Anyway, it seemed like it wasn't that simple for Tokiya, either. *He needs time to prepare himself*, I guessed. After all, I had been quite flustered that morning as well, atypical as it was of me.

But maybe he'll be ready tomorrow.

What needs be done on my part? Well... I'll be asleep by then, so I can only sleep normally.

I tried lying down on my back.

Yes, lying like this should do the trick...

Wait! Doesn't it look like I'm waiting for him when I'm sleeping like this?

Indeed. Let's go with a face-down position.

I turned over onto my belly.

Wait! Tokiya won't be able to do anything like this.

How about making a compromise and sleeping sideways?

I turned myself 90 degrees.

Tokiya's face was right before my eyes.

I jumped to my feet.

Wow, that startled me. This isn't good for my heart. I should calm down and give it some more thought later.

Suddenly feeling exhausted, I let out a deep sigh. And then I noticed something.

Oh, I haven't brushed my teeth yet. Let's take care of this first, yes!

I went to the bathroom and started brushing my teeth; the typical "ch-ch-ch" resounded through the room.

"Not that I have bad breath. Yesterday's dinner was mainly vegetables, after all."

Ch-ch-ch.

"Ah, but I added some minced onions to the omelets. I should be fine, though, since I didn't eat them raw..."

Ch-ch-ch.

"N-Now that I think about it, I had some black tea before I went to sleep. A peculiar type, so maybe there's still some of its fragrance left..."

Ch-ch-ch-ch.

"C-Come to think of it, I also had some tea *after* brushing my teeth because I became thirsty..."

"Hm? Why are you brushing your teeth?" Towako-san suddenly said from behind.

"Uh..."

Oh, I almost swallowed the toothpaste.

I finished and turned around to her.

"We didn't even have dinner yet..." Towako-san muttered suspiciously and then flashed a mischievous smile. "Quite the impatient girl, aren't you, Saki-chan? You still have over 11 hours left. Heh, way to go! Make sure to brush them well!"

"T-That's not it..."

"What's not it?"

S-She's enjoying it. She's totally enjoying this situation.

Feigning indifference, I asked, "Correct me if I'm wrong, but does it matter who executes the method that you mentioned for lifting the curse?"

"Hm? Well, I guess it doesn't."

"Why don't you do it, then, Towako-san?"

I thought that was a great idea, if I may say so myself. There was no need that it was Tokiya and me who kissed.

Towako-san put a hand to her chin, and after some thought, she said "I see" as she clapped her hands. "It can be interpreted like that indeed!"

She walked up to me, and gently lifted my chin up, making me face her, while did the exact opposite and ducked my head slightly.

"That's cool with me, I guess, if you insist," she said.

"Eh? Eh? Eh?" Despite being the originator of the idea, I wasn't able to follow.

Towako-san's womanly lips drew nearer and nearer; they were moist and beautiful because she always used a weak lipstick.

How about me? I became worried that my lips were dry. It would be embarrassing if he thought I had chapped lips.

Ah, didn't Koumoto-san give me a lipstick back then? I thought back at the hairdresser I had visited recently. But isn't it a bit strange to put on lipstick for sleep? No, it's not, right?

Ah! I shouldn't be thinking about this now!

"Oh, wait!" Towako-san suddenly said, just when I was about to look away, as she pulled her head back.

"What's the matter?" I asked while hiding the relief I was feeling inside. It was such times that I was grateful of my lack of expression.

"I just thought I'd better keep your lips for Tokiya because he may have changed his mind by now. 'Guess I'll only take care of him for the time being."

Take care of him...? That means that Towako-san is going to...

"Well, let's strike while the iron's hot, shall we?"

With these words, she walked toward Tokiya, but suddenly she stopped and slowly turned to me.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Well?" She pointed downward.

I followed her finger and noticed that I had grabbed her sleeve without noticing. Completely unwittingly.

"Eh, um, I..." I quickly pulled my hand away as I searched for words.

I had really not intended to do so. My hands had moved on their own.

Towako-san gave a light laugh and concluded, "You should really do it by the two of you."

"Ah, no, I didn't mean to..."

"Wouldn't it save everyone time and costs if the kiss was just between Tokiya and you, Saki-chan?" She patted on my head and left the bathroom.

Save time and costs? She's right. We are carrying the same curse, so it would be more effective this way. Besides, we can't bother Towako-san with even more work when she has already done all the research for us.

I must have already come to that conclusion subconsciously, and that's why my hand held her back.

Yes, I'm sure.



It was 8 AM sharp when I woke up.

Next to me lay a sleeping Saki who must have fallen asleep just now.

That meant that the spell hadn't been broken yet—in other words, that she hadn't kissed me.

I found myself being half-relieved and half-disappointed... R-Relieved that Saki didn't beat me to it, because well, I'm the guy, so I should do it, and d-disappointed because I'd had faint hopes that the curse might be lifted conveniently through some other way...

A-Anyway, I had to seize the initiative. For one thing, it seemed unlikely to me that Saki would... do *that*, and for another, I felt that this was a task for the guy to do. I felt so... but that's easier said than done.

However, my own misgivings weren't the problem here. I didn't care about myself so much.

I for one didn't have any special ideas on how I wanted to experience my first kiss, nor did I want to save it for ever. *Yeah, my first! Got a problem?!*

Anyway, I was actually done preparing myself mentally.

The problem was how Saki felt about it.

I didn't think that she was exactly happy, but I wondered if she was willing to swallow the bitter pill; that would've made things easier. What I feared, however, was that she was desperately searching for another way that didn't involve *that*.

Or perhaps, she preferred to leave the curse as it was over lifting it through that method.

"Ah, dammit! Can't we have a few minutes when we're both awake?!"

Why are our sleeping cycles precisely 12 hours from another...?

I started chewing on a gum to calm down a bit, and finally came up with a great—or maybe decent—idea.

"I'll leave her a message."

That was our best bet if we couldn't directly talk with each other.

I took a notepad and a pencil and decided to write her a message. I didn't care that I was going to be late for school.

Okay, now what to write.

"I never know how to start this sort of thing. Um... *Dear Saki, my name is Tokiya Kurusu.* Okay, I guess I'm officially stupid. Dude, what's the point in writing a full-fledged letter?"

Nom-nom-nom, I chewed on my gum.

"Straight to the point. Hmmm, *hey, may I kiss you?* Whoa, this is embarrassing as hell!"

Nom-nom-nom.

"You're missing the point, dude. She knows what I'm going to do well enough."

Nom-nom-nom.

"The main problem is... um, *are you okay if your first kiss is with me?* Man, you're a wimp. You're a total wimp, dude!"

Nom-nom-nom.

"Dammit! Nothing feels right... well, of course not! There's not right or wrong to this sort of thing!"

"Oh, Tokiya? Still here?" Towako-san said as she entered the living room, still drowsy with sleep.

"Ugh..."

Oh, I almost gulped down my chewing gum.

In a hurry—but while pretending to be as cool as a cucumber—I tossed the pile of memos into the trash bin.

"What're you doing?" she asked, "Hm? You bought some candy? Now that's something. Lemme see. 'Freshens Your Breath', 'For a Good Breath', 'eliminates bad breath after meals', 'Citrus Mint.'" she read aloud the texts on the package, and flashed a mischievous grin. "Lech."

"H-Hey, I didn't buy them to freshen my breath or anything! They help me settle down."

"Why do you need to settle down?"

"Eh..."

"Listen, screw that settling-down stuff and strike the iron while it's hot. Saki-

chan's waiting, you know?"

"Mind your own business! I'm going to school!"



It was 8 PM sharp when I woke up.

Next to me lay a sleeping Tokiya who must have fallen asleep just now.

That meant that the spell hadn't been lifted yet—in other words, that he hadn't kissed me yet.

...so I prepared myself for nothing. Eh, not that I did anything in special; I always sleep face-up, after all, and while I did brush my teeth twice as often and long as usual, that was only a counter-measure against caries!

The lip-stick was just against dry lips, too. They have been a little chapped lately.

A-Anyway.

I gave Tokiya a reproachful look.

Coward...

These 12-hour cycles were going to continue if he didn't do anything; we wouldn't ever be able to talk with each other again!

Or is he okay with that...?

"!" I gasped when suddenly that thought raised a new possibility.

Yes... perhaps that's true.

Tokiya could go to school and to work without a problem. The only things that had changed for him were that he could sleep a little bit more and that he couldn't see me when I was awake.

Perhaps, he didn't consider that a problem. Perhaps, he didn't mind a change of that extent. Perhaps—

He would rather keep things as they were than fulfilling the condition needed to lift the curse.

I hadn't thought of such a possibility; I hadn't fathomed that Tokiya might be put off.

"Hey, Tokiya... are you really so loath to do it?"

There was no response.

I was overcome by anxiety—the desire to run away.

At the end of the day, I'm just a teenager girl.

I do have them, too — those moments when you get uneasy because you imagine being disliked.



It was 8 AM sharp when I woke up.

Next to me lay a sleeping Saki who must have fallen asleep just now.

It was about time to settle things.

Before going to sleep, I had decided that I would no longer waver when I

next woke up.

I had also asked Shinjou, a classmate of mine, for advice, because—much to my chagrin—he had already had his first kiss with that manager girl. Completely dumbfounded he asked, "What? You haven't kissed yet? Even though you've got such a cute girlfriend?" Saki and I weren't in that kind of relationship, but I didn't want to flinch in front of him.

Basically, my manly pride had accelerated my determination. While that may be a bit rude toward the other party, I didn't care.

It was as Towako-san had said: I just had to strike the iron while it was hot.

I looked around cautiously.

Having Towako-san anywhere nearby was going to brake me, but I had to use my current momentum. Otherwise, I wasn't going to get in motion anytime soon.

"Okay, let's do this!" I said, bracing myself, and leaned over Saki.

Her dreaming face—her calm, defenseless face—was right before my eyes. Even her deadpan look was pretty cute when she was asleep.

While I was gazing her face, my mind was attacked by several stray thoughts. *I didn't know her eyelashes were so long. She really has silky skin.*

No no, I gotta concentrate.

I looked at her delicate, slightly moist, slightly colored lips.

Was that lip-stick...? Against chapped lips, or because she had prepared herself as well?

At any rate, I was absorbed by her unexpectedly fine lips.

"Uh..." I accidentally gulped down, producing an uncomfortably loud gulping sound.

Hey, I, I don't have any nasty thoughts!

This is for the sake of both of us.

Yeah, go! Tokiya Kurusu, if you are a man, you shall not hesitate! Go and taste them! Eh, no. Well, but yes.

Anyway, go, Tokiya, take a deep breath and get to it!

I braced my arms that were supporting my body—and noticed that I'd touched something.

It was a memo.

Since it looked like a message from Saki, I picked it up and read it.

How long are you going to take for something that's no different from mouth-to-mouth resuscitation?

What a...

What a charmless girl...

Despite all my worries that I'd fought against for days like a complete moron, wondering if she was okay with someone like me, she didn't seem to care in the least.

No, she considered the source of my worries to be on the same level as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. She was spitting on the time I had spent worrying, saying that I should hurry up, as if she didn't even care about my feelings.

I moved away from Saki.

I had lost momentum.

No, it had vanished.

Into thin air.

Leaving nothing behind.



It was 8 PM sharp when I woke up.

Next to me... was no one.

"Eh?"

Could this mean that we...?

Just when I was about to touch my lips, I noticed that Tokiya was sleeping at the corner. Without a blanket and turned toward the wall.

Why is that...?

Tokiya should have been awake if the curse had been lifted. If, on the other hand, the curse was still intact, I didn't see why he would sleep so far from me. Of course, there was no reason for us to sleep in the same futon either, but we had only one down here and we wouldn't be sleeping there at the same time anyway. Until now, Tokiya had always been right beside me when I woke up.

Just by sleeping separately and turned away from each other, I felt somehow rejected—

Suddenly, my hand bumped against something. It was the message I had written to Tokiya when I was getting anxious.

The piece of paper was crumpled as though it had been scrunched up. Perhaps, I had accidentally rolled on it while

sleeping.

After some fiddling, I managed to unfold the memo, and found my message as well as an additional line with Tokiya's handwriting and his words.

If it means so little to you, then do it yourself!

...So he was loath to do it, after all.

Turning his back to me was a sign of clear, unmistakable rejection.

The only reason why he was still sleeping in the same room despite that was probably to have me put an end to this already. He could still make excuses if the one actually doing it was me.

At any rate, he must absolutely hate to do it himself. So much that he couldn't even do it when thinking of it as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Why am I adding probablies and musts?

*He **does** hate to do it.*

I had had a faint feeling that Tokiya was interested in me, but I was wrong. Perhaps, there was already a girl on his mind even.

However, I was sure that wasn't me.

It might be wrong to think like this, since we weren't in a relationship or anything, but I just, I just wanted him to

show maybe not affection, but at least that he didn't hate me. Not that I got my hopes up; I just wanted him to be a tiny bit attracted to me.

However, Tokiya didn't want to. So much that he couldn't even think of it as rescue breathing. So much that he had to push the task upon me.

He could hardly bear it if I was his partner.

But then—

Why did you embrace me like that?!

Because of that, I had been strangely aware of Tokiya the past few days. He hadn't even given me a proper explanation.

It was no coincidence. He did not stumble.

He hugged me closely and strongly, so that I could hardly breathe.

But maybe that had nothing to do with that kind of feeling. Maybe I was alone with thinking about him all the time.

Perhaps, it had been nothing special to Tokiya.

I feel like an idiot.

I tossed the memo I had crumpled up again at the trash bin. Instead of falling into it, however, the bin fell over and distributed its contents on the floor.

Even this won't go smoothly.

In order to bring out the trash, I stood up and started to collect the spilled contents as if to collect myself and recover from the ruffled emotions. There were lots of bubble gum wrappers and packages and scraps of paper. I noticed that I hadn't regularly brought out the trash ever since this started.

Let's get this over with already.

Is Towako-san awake? Once I'm done here, I'll ask her to do what must be done Tokiya and me and be done with it.

Maybe I should just use that Censer and get the real thing?

With such silly thoughts I picked up another memo sheet. *One of the many I have written and scrapped*, I figured. I had composed a whole lot of them while I was racking my brains about what I should write.

Tokiya is going to bothered if he sees this; I'll pick those out and burn them for good.

Dear Saki, my name is Tokiya Kurusu—

"Huh?"

I didn't recognize the message written on the memo.

It's not one of mine...?

I carefully smoothed the crumpled sheet. Though hard to read, it was Tokiya's handwriting; he had written this memo.

I tried taking a look at the other crumpled sheets.

Hey, may I kiss you?

Are you okay if your first kiss is with me?

Won't you regret it?

If you'd rather not, I'm absolutely okay with that!

I found countless of these messages. Written, crumpled, discarded. Written, crumpled, discarded.

I could clearly picture his uncertainty to myself.

I could clearly see how much he had thought about me, how much he had worried about me, and how much he had brooded over this matter.

I could clearly understand why he couldn't just think of it as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation—because of me.

I almost had to laugh. No one else but *Saki Maino* almost had to laugh.

"You're such a silly."

I walked to where Tokiya was sleeping, facing the wall without even putting a blanket over himself.

Earlier, he had frightened me because he looked like he was rejecting me, but now he looked cute, like a sulking boy.

I covered him with a blanket and gently put a newly written memo into his hand.

"Hey, Tokiya..." I whispered softly at his ear, not caring that he couldn't hear me.



It was 5 PM I had come back from school and was looking down at a sleeping Saki.

That morning, Saki hadn't been beside me when I woke up. For a moment there I got my hopes up, but I quickly noticed her sleeping in the middle of the room, face-up; It was me who had been sleeping elsewhere and who had the blanket.

The curse had not been lifted.

Apparently, Saki was bent on pushing the job upon me, but I had not the slightest intention to do as she wanted.

I was thinking to leave it to Towako-san, who, however, seemed to be absent at the present time. She wasn't there in the morning, either. *Jeez, she'd better not be doing it on purpose.*

Anyway, I had no choice but to wait for her return while praying that that would be before 8 PM. I didn't want to stay like this forever.

I looked at Saki's face.

It was the same carefree, expressionless face like always.

I would have loved to share even just a fraction of my worries with her. That being said, she would probably maintain her deadpan face, and reply something like, "What? You've been thinking about *that*?"

"If it's so simple for you, why won't you..." I started making complaints she couldn't hear anyway, when I suddenly discovered a memo where I had been

sleeping this morning.

The one I left next to her pillow yesterday...?

I had written something along the lines of "*If it means so little to you, then do it yourself!*"

Does that mean that she didn't read it, if it's lying around there? Or did she read it and then throw it away?

I picked up the—to my surprise—neatly folded memo.

Didn't I crumple it when I placed it next to Saki...?

I unfolded the sheet of paper and looked at it.

"What..."

It was a letter from Saki.



I woke up.

Next to me—was no one.

Tokiya was already within my field of vision when I woke up.

"Finally woken up? I was really getting worried because you wouldn't wake up for two hours!" he explained as he let out a deep sigh of relief. "Well, but looks like the curse is gone now."



He showed me the time; it was 7 PM. One hour before I would usually wake up.

"If I'm not asleep in an hour, then that's over and done with, no?" he smiled at me.

The fact that I was awake at this time meant that the curse had been lifted, which in turn meant that *that certain act* had been conducted, and the fact that Tokiya was standing there was speaking for itself...

So was the fact that I still felt a slightly tickling sensation on my lips...

"Saki." Tokiya was looking at me with a serious expression.

"I-It's fine. Don't mind it. It's really just like rescue breathing. Ah, no, it's not like I'm thinking of it like that. Just, how should I put it... um, I am, yes, happy that you were..."

"Meow~"

"That you were... huh? Meow?"

An unfamiliar sound called me back to reality. A cat poked its head out on Tokiya's arms. It was Mii, Asami-chan's pet.

But what was Mii doing here?

"Ah, um, listen. A lot happened, you know, but to cut right to the chase..."

"Yes?"

"This little guy has lifted our curse."

"What?"

"Well... looks like even a fellow like this can lift that curse, eh?"

I looked at Mii in his arms. It innocently licked its lips as if to give its thanks for the feast.

The following day, I got up at 8 AM and disposed of the trash. It was quite a lot of work because the garbage had piled up over the past few days, but I was delighted to be able to work and get up at this time.

Shortly, I would be able to make my long-awaited comeback to the world of customer service.

I was excited. *Yes, I am excited! Like never before! Truly.*

In the end, Tokiya also had Mii lift his curse and went home after confirming that he didn't fall asleep at 8 PM. We had made sure to pack the ashes tightly up when throwing them into the trash, so that nothing would leak.

What a troublesome pile of ashes. Really, this can't be said enough.

"Ah, Saki-chaan!" someone called my name.

It was Asami-chan, one of my few friends and the owner of Mii.

"Did Mii behave well?" she asked.

"...Quite so."

"S-Saki-chan? Are you angry?"

Oh no, I became rattled for a moment.

"No, I'm not. But that aside: you're quite early today, what's the matter?"

"I'm here to fetch Mii."

"Oh, I would have brought Mii to you..."

Tokiya had told me to return Mii to Asami-chan in the morning. I had been planning to go as soon as I'd taken care of the garbage and prepared breakfast.

"But I was missing Mii."

"Let's head back together then." I proposed.

"Mm," she nodded in response.

We joined our hands and walked back to the Tsukumodo Antique Shop. On the way, Asami-chan pursed her small lips and complained, "Onii-chan was a total meanie yesterday!"

She was referring to Tokiya by *Onii-chan*.

"He suddenly turned up in the evening and said he wanted to borrow Mii. He didn't even tell me why!"

Apparently, Asami-chan hadn't given Mii away willingly, which made perfect sense, since animals are not something to trade with. Tokiya must have been quite pushy to get Mii because he couldn't just explain the situation to her.

"You must always give a reason when you ask someone to lend you something!" Asami-chan said.

"You're right. I'll be sure to tell him."

I was amused to see her act so maturely.

"And I'll have to give him some more minus points for

coming in the middle of dinner," she added.

"Oh, you were having dinner? That's quite early, isn't it?"

Tokiya must have gone to borrow Mii around 5 PM.

"Hm? I think it's normal. We always eat around that time."

"Right after you come home from school?" I asked.

"No, not really! School is already over at 5."

"Yes, but didn't you have dinner around that time?"

"If dinner was that early, I would get hungry at night! We always have it around 6."

"6? That's also when Tokiya came to borrow Mii?"

"Yeah."

What's the meaning of this?

I mean, I woke up at 7 PM. That means that Tokiya can't have borrowed Mii at 6 PM.

After all...

After all...

Tokiya said:

I was really getting worried because you wouldn't wake up for two hours!

Unless he had told me a lie, that would mean that the curse was lifted at 5 PM. But Tokiya borrowed Mii at 6 PM when

Asami-chan was having dinner with her family.

If that's true, Mii wasn't around at 5 PM, right?

What's the meaning of this?

Did he make a slip of the tongue? Or did Asami-chan's memory fail her?

Or—

"Saki-chan, now you look happy somehow!"

"It's nothing."

Without even noticing, I touched my lips.



Phew, looks like this matter has finally been settled. What a troublesome curse. Really.

I had already seen my share of Relics, but none had exhausted me that much. I sure didn't want to experience that ever again.

Finally, I was back at Home, Sweet Home. My cheap apartment. My castle.

Lying on the floor, I put my hand into my pocket and took out a memo along with the rattling of paper.

It was the memo Saki had addressed to me.

I felt mortally embarrassed whenever I read it.

That girl had read the drafts I had thrown away!

Dammit! I look totally stupid!

It was sort of a reply to the unsightly fight I'd had with myself. While it did

put an end to the conflict, it also threw up new worries.

It made me feel even worse for doing it in such an ambiguous and hidden manner while she was asleep!

After agonizing over it for an eternity, I had finally come up with the idea of using Mii.

Leaving aside Mii for now—with the intention to apologize on another occasion—it looks like she completely bought it. That's one thing off my shoulders.

I looked at her memo again. It was Saki's answer.

Who else is there better?

That's way too cute for you...

When told something like that, even someone like me will...

Lose his self-control for a moment.

Afterword

People, this is the 3rd volume! A completely new realm for me!

I really struggled writing this volume, more so than ever before. If you wonder what bothered me, well, to be frank, I fell off my snowboard and broke my left elbow, which left me with no other choice but to write the larger part of this book with one arm alone. That being said, considering that the snow has long since melted away because of the summerly weather as of this writing, I should be alive and kicking by the time you are reading this afterword (which will be in the season of delicious mushrooms at the earliest, I suppose).

One ought to take care of one's tools. Please always pay attention not to injure yourselves, dear readers.

All right, let's proceed to a brief introduction of the chapters like always.

Chest

In this chapter, Tokiya and Saki search for a lost cat, and in the course of doing so, they visit the mansion of an old woman who possesses a chest that preserves everything you store inside in a perfect state and disappears until a certain configurable date.

Speaking of chests and boxes, I've recently had the pleasure of dealing with cardboard boxes. Yes, I moved just the other day. Little did I know that I would discover cheap, hand-written manuscripts from my younger days while arranging my belongings... I can't throw them away, but I don't want to read them either. Is there no good place to hide them?

Puppet

As though drawn in by something, Saki is made to touch a windup key with a

string woven around it, which Towako has bought the other day. The start of a new incident.

The idea that initiated this story didn't originally have anything to do with Tsukumodo Antique Shop, but I thought it might fit in just nicely. I'm glad the idea could see the light of day.

Dream

There is a censer that is said to give you complete control over your dreams if you fall asleep while using it. This chapter begins with a girl who has lost her lover in an accident and gets her hands on that censer...

There is a dream I always have when I'm ill. In that dream, my field of vision is entirely covered by a mandala background across which flies a phoenix-like bird. I've had that dream ever since elementary school. I wonder how I'm supposed to interpret that...

Sleeping Beauty

The incense they obtained in the previous chapters turns out to have an unexpected by-effect and causes Tokiya and Saki to fall asleep for exactly 12 hours in turns. How can they lift that curse?

I hope you'll find it enjoyable to watch them talk past each other once more.

Okay, I would now like to give my thanks to all my contributors like always.

I would like to offer my thanks to Takabayashi-san, my great editor in charge, to Takeshima Satoshi, who is enhancing the story greatly with his splendid illustrations, to everyone who has helped making this book happen, and last but not least, to all my dear readers.

Thank you so much!

Furthermore, thanks to everyone who has sent me a fan-letter. While I'm sadly unable to reply to all of them due to time restrictions, I make sure to read through them without an exception. They are my source of power to write; and I will give my best to make good use of it.

Well then, I hope to see you again!

Akihiko Odou